

Sunday 24 February 2008: Third Sunday of Lent

Sermon Preached at Grace Cathedral, San Francisco

Readings: Psalm 95; Exodus 17.1-7; Romans 5.1-11; John 4.5-42

At St Martin-in-the-Fields in Lent we have visiting preachers at our Sunday Eucharists and at the evening services lay people from our own community give the address. In effect, this means the clergy give up preaching for Lent. Thank you for inviting me to Grace so at least I get to preach once. After our first visitor this Lent, a very distinguished economist, one of the congregation said, "Visitors always disappoint". Say no more.

I've really puzzled about this sermon. The readings are fabulous: 3 great readings *and* a psalm - and there are parts of the Anglican Communion that say The Episcopal Church doesn't take the Bible seriously!

If I were at home I'd know exactly what I want to say. Jesus asked for a drink of water from
a woman
who had been married five times and now lived with another man
and she was a Samaritan.

Just to make sure we get the point John added, "Jews do not share things in common with the Samaritans".

On the basis of the prayer used by Alcoholics Anonymous – "God grant me the grace to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference" - these personal qualities are a mix of things she might conceivably have been able to do something about – not getting married so often – and things over which she had no control whatsoever. That she was a Samaritan woman was a 'given' of her existence but the combination meant she was despised by Jews, and expected to be despised by Jesus.

"Give me a drink." Jesus' question sets up the story in a way that she is an active participant, not just the passive object by which he is seen to be the Messiah.

This took place at Jacob's well. So it's about how the salvation witnessed to by the people of God is attested in the most surprising way by the least likely of people. It demonstrates in such a powerful way that the living water of Christ, which we experience through baptism, is for all. The whole point of the Gospel is that it leads to the Samaritans saying, "we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this is truly the saviour of the world". That's the key purpose of John's Gospel in which "God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life." (*Jn 3.16*)

That this is shown through the despised, marginal and outcast is so much the pattern of Jesus that it's no longer a surprise to us, and you're well used to it here at Grace. So all I can say is, be renewed in your commitment; keep on believing it and acting on it.

So what about today's Epistle from Romans which began, "Since we are justified by faith we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have gained access to this grace in which we stand". This is grace for Grace.

I used to teach Ethics at an English seminary, where Dean Jones had previously left a good reputation. What was tricky, was teaching that Christian ethics matter without teaching that Christian ethics is what really matter because in the end, none of us stand in the presence of God because we have done well but because we are loved, forgiven and renewed by the grace of God. None of us is any better than the way Jews of Jesus' day perceived the much married Samaritan woman. There is human solidarity in our being sinners in need of forgiveness, and 'sin' is both that distance we humans have put between ourselves and God corporately – it's part of our nature and it's structural to our society, and each of us personally can't take responsibility for it, it's how we are – and it's personal – my own wilful, often weak, sometimes stupid fault. None of us can put ourselves right with God. We depend on God's grace.

One of my favourite books of moral theology is called 'The Vision of God'. It was published in 1931 by an Oxford theologian and later Bishop, Kenneth Kirk. He wrote that, "it is not that conduct is the end of life and worship helps it but that worship is the end of life and conduct tests it". "Worship lifts the soul out of its preoccupation with itself and its activities, and centres its aspirations entirely on God." He warns us, "not to confuse worship with the quest for 'religious experience' (so very popular in our day) nor with the employment of devout thoughts to stimulate moral effort (much less popular), for both these counterfeits to worship lend themselves only too readily to egocentricism". Worship, "disinfects our egoism". It is, "something which *comes upon* the soul, not which is achieved by it".

Something that 'comes upon us' is a pretty good description of grace and worship is where it finds us.

One of the reasons I am here this morning is because I'm in the US fundraising. St Martin-in-the-Fields is coming towards the end of a major \$72 million buildings renewal to equip it for service in the 21st century. We are a beautiful 18th century church, the architectural model for many North American churches. But we're also one of the world's best known music venues, have a ministry to street homeless people and young people at risk, as well as a Centre for Chinese People. We have congregations worshipping in English, Cantonese and Mandarin, and an education programme engaging church and wider society. Because we are an international church with strong US connections we're aiming to raise \$3 million by the end of this year as the US portion towards the renewal project.

What I have discovered on my travels is that whilst the Anglican Communion is having a hard time at the level of our Provinces, the Communion still works at the level of church congregations. What will hold us together is not the relationships between Archbishops and Presiding Bishops, important though they are, but the relationship between thousands of individuals and congregations 'in Christ'.

London is now the most cosmopolitan city on earth. Over 300 first languages are spoken there. In Trafalgar Square, the church is made up of people who are Londoners from all over the world. And each Sunday we are joined by visitors, as are you. Each church is the world's local church. It is not difficult to be 'in communion' because that does not depend on us all thinking or doing the same. Being 'in communion' depends on a simple act of taking and giving thanks for bread and wine, offering it to God, breaking and sharing it, "in memory of Jesus". Communion is not our possession but God's gift. It's grace. How odd we forget this?

And what about that first reading, from Exodus when the Israelites were wandering around the wilderness of Sin, with no water and no hope. It ended, “The Israelites quarrelled and tested the Lord saying, ‘Is the Lord among us or not?’

In the bad tempered Anglican Communion that’s what many people are wondering. We’re grumbling about our leaders and about each other. It feels as though we’re a long way from the kingdom of heaven and not even sure if we’re heading in the right direction. It’s not a single issue, same sex relationships; not even a nexus of issues around the use of the Bible; it’s about power and control and about people thinking they have the true Gospel and a responsibility to impose it to for the ultimate good of others.

You might have heard that the Archbishop of Canterbury got into trouble a couple of weeks ago with a lecture about the relationship between religious and civil law. He said that in the UK the accommodation of Islamic sharia law was unavoidable. Whether he was wise to say it is debateable but as a matter of fact, he’s right. There has already been an accommodation with sharia in relation to financial practices. The anger that was generated by the Archbishop’s lecture was extraordinary and one reason must be the fear of sharia associated with the brutality of Islamic fundamentalism.

The furore led me to look up the meaning of ‘sharia’ which is ‘the path to the water source’. People will argue about whether Islam, Christian or any other faith really does offer the water of life but it’s what our Scriptures say God was offering the Israelites in the wilderness. It’s what Jesus was seen to be offering in his encounter with the Samaritan woman at Jacob’s well, it’s the grace of God given us in Jesus Christ.

What is distinctive in the way of Christ is that God is known in all, including in the most surprising of people and circumstances. That’s down to who we are, and nothing else. Our desire to find God is the reorientation of our lives that we seek in Lent. It’s our responsibility to keep our appetite for God sharp and to hunger for love and justice so that we do them and response to God’s love of us. The disciplines of Lent are to renew us, so that we sing again with the Psalmist,

“Come let us bow down and bend the knee
And kneel down before the Lord our Maker
For he is our god,
And we are the sheep of his pasture...
Oh that today you would hearken to his voice!”

Psalm 95.6 – 8a