

18 January 2009 Epiphany 2

Grace Under Pressure

Readings: Revelation 5. John 1.43-end

The beginning of John's Gospel is a week, like the seven days of creation, starting with that marvellous passage read at Christmas Midnight Mass, setting Jesus, the Word of God, in cosmological history: "In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God..." Then follows, "This is the testimony of John....And on the next day.... And on the next day.....And on the next day Jesus decided to go to Galilee...". So this is the fifth day of the week. Even though Jesus was a Galilean it is all a bit surprising for the Son of God and King of Israel as Galilee was 'The North' with the sort of snobbery that southerners in England reserve for what others know as 'God's own country'.

Jesus was gathering his disciples. Philip was from the same city as Andrew and Peter and Philip found Nathaniel. These relationships are based on friends and kinship. One of the lovely things about being a parish priest is getting caught up with families over a period of time. 12 years ago Jago's grandfather could not have really known what it would mean to get involved with St Martin's. He has led our buildings renewal, Angus and Sarah were married here and even to the third generation: Jago is to be baptised here, as have two of his cousins. It is how Jesus gathers disciples.

"We have found him about whom Moses in the law and also the prophets wrote". This is according to the scriptures, "Jesus son of Joseph from Nazareth", and it is not as expected. It's difficult to get the exact parallel in our day but it might be something like, 'Jesus from... Barnsley'. There's nothing wrong with Barnsley, as I doubt there was anything wrong with Nazareth. It's just not the centre of the known world and certainly not where you expect the Messiah to come from.

'Come and see'. And what is so winning is not the great works of the Son of God but his simple recognition. "When Jesus saw Nathanael coming towards him he said of him, 'Here is truly an Israelite in whom there is no deceit (no guile)!'" You can't say that about many people and the recognition is based solely on him having seen Nathanael under the fig tree. I have always been grateful for the people who have believed I am better than I am because they helped me to be so. The homeless people who use The Connection at the moment are really taken by the fact we have provided them with lovely new facilities because we believe in them. They stand a little taller. In Nathanael's case it leads to instant belief and the promise he will see even greater things. "I tell you, you will see heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man." With that promise ends the fifth day.

The Gospel of John immediately continues, "And on the third day there was a wedding at Cana in Galilee". The third day after the fifth day, is the eighth day, the first day of the next week. So the wedding of Cana in Galilee, where the first miracle was performed turning water into wine, is a resurrection story, an Easter story, "on the third day". It's

when ‘the greater things than these’ become immediately apparent. What happens when we follow Jesus is that we are drawn into his resurrection: the water becomes wine, ordinary things are transformed. In Christ’s resurrection we make a new beginning. That’s what we are baptised into.

It would be good if we could leave it there: so perfect, so much hope, so much promise. But real life is lived under pressure, goes wrong, needs to be rescued; and the Gospel continues telling the life of Christ with signs *and* controversies. It leads to an extraordinary betrayal, to the denial of a friend who had sworn faithfulness and been thought of as a rock, and the carefully considered violence of the crucifixion, before ever we get to Easter Day. Baptism into this way is not cosy, though in a deeper sense it is life giving as nothing else on earth.

I was really struck by what the Mayor of New York said this week about the pilot who crash landed his plane successfully in the Hudson River. He quoted Ernest Hemingway who said that, “courage is having grace under pressure”. Actually, the original is even better. Dorothy Parker asked Hemingway what he meant by “guts” and Hemingway replied that, “it’s having grace under pressure”. ‘Guts’ feels immediate and is visceral.

So often people think that being a Christian means life is all plain sailing, but having guts, living with grace under pressure, is a much better way of thinking about what it means for Christians to live with Christ in the resurrection. The first reading today was from the Revelation of St John the Divine. This curious apocalyptic is unique in the New Testament but it exists elsewhere in the Bible, for example the Book of Daniel, and the genre of apocalyptic is quite common. Apocalyptic is the sort of writing that is produced by people are under pressure. The Revelation of St John the Divine probably comes from either the end of the first century or the beginning of the second, but it certainly comes from a period of persecution when Christians had to decide how much their faith mattered, and whether it was life and death to them. John’s Revelation was that the power of Christ, who is both the lion and the lamb, is greater than any earthly power. Ultimately it is for the healing of the nations and the creation of a new heaven and a new earth in which righteousness dwells. This way is for people who are prepared to risk everything in an act of faith.

It isn’t fashionable to give your life so completely to another but it is, paradoxically, life giving. The Christian martyrs, or witnesses, are those who lived and died with guts, grace under pressure. What their faith gave them has become an ideal for us. Self does not always come first: there are things worth dying for – other people, important principles, Christ. This is not a faith in which ‘anything goes’.

Oh, and for those of us who have come to church feeling fragile in a broken world and not really up for Christian heroics, perhaps because we know ourselves too well, there is comfort in the mercy and kindness of God in whom friendship, love and forgiveness are the preeminent qualities. Like the people using the new facilities in The Connection, that’s what makes us able to stand a little taller and on this first day of the week to have the courage to try again by celebrating the resurrection.