

Sunday 1 June 2008: The Second Sunday after Trinity

Words in our heart and soul

Readings: Deuteronomy 11:18-21, 26-28; Matthew 7:21-end

Jesus said to his disciples: "Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father in heaven. You shall put these words of mine in your heart and soul, and you shall bind them as a sign on your hand, and fix them as an emblem on your forehead.

The children's charity the NSPCC recently launched a "micro story" competition for teenagers, encouraging them to write a 100-word piece of fiction on what matters most to them. The sponsors of the competition, designed to encourage creativity and communication skills amongst young people, have enrolled the support of writers such as Nick Hornby by setting them the same task – write a story in 100 words or less. Setting myself the same challenge and not counting the scripture quotations, I now have exactly ten words of this sermon left!

Even before I heard that story earlier this week, I'd been pondering this morning's readings, and finding myself questioning the value of words – certainly the value of excessive words, but perhaps the value of words at all. It may have been prompted by a spring clearout of all the mail that had accumulated over months and realising the sheer volume of unread circulars, magazines, papers and flyers that I was about to assign to the recycling bin. It may have been the thought of soon moving back to refurbished offices and flats and looking at the new piles of unread books I've collected to go with those confined to storage for the last 18 months. And beyond the words on paper, are those that bombard us constantly from radio or TV or through the internet, or the seemingly unstoppable daily torrent of e-mails.

Whatever prompted my musings, it's part of the realisation that I find words an increasingly inadequate way of expressing the things that seem most meaningful to me, and certainly an increasingly inadequate way of expressing the relationship with God that we call prayer.

Having a public role as a Christian minister of religion, of course means that I'm called upon fairly constantly to spout words in sermons, prayers and in writing. Sometimes I'm asked to express my view, or even worse the "church's" view on events or issues. Most, if not all of the time, I feel inadequate to that task, but I don't think it's just about me and my failings. Our readings this morning have led me to think that there are two fundamental issues that lie behind this struggle with words. One is the link between our words and the way we put those words into action:

"Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father in heaven.

And the other is what we think of as religious words, are actually trying to say something about things that are inexpressible and yet that we want desperately to understand – the things that drive us and give us purpose and make us get up in the morning even if we've gone to bed believing that nothing really makes any sense.

You shall put these words of mine in your heart and soul, and you shall bind them as a sign on your hand, and fix them as an emblem on your forehead.

The section we heard from Matthew's Gospel has to be one of the most difficult of all for "religious people" of any age. It's the final part of what we know as the Sermon on the Mount, three chapters of Jesus' words and teaching, that are amongst the familiar and oft quoted of any parts of the Gospels; but also amongst the sharpest and most challenging manifesto of faithful and ethical living possible. And here at the end of it, Jesus relates an imaginary conversation between himself and those who consider themselves justified by their words and their deeds. These people he tells us say the right thing and apparently confess the right faith "Jesus is Lord". They do the right things, prophesying, casting out demons, deeds of great power. And yet Jesus says "Then I will declare to them, "I never knew you; go away from me, you evildoers." And he goes on to tell a parable contrasting those who not only hear his words but act on them with those for whom his words remain mere words. And the response of the people is one of astonishment at the authority with which he spoke.

Christianity, like the Jewish religion which is part of our heritage, is a religion of words and a faith of the word. Our first reading came from the book of Deuteronomy, one of the first five books of the Hebrew scriptures, the Torah, revered as expressing the heart of the covenant between God and his people. The words of the Law can make fairly difficult reading but the words we heard today from Deuteronomy are I think amongst the most moving in scripture. Here the people of Israel are called to engage with the words of the law not simply as a rulebook to be consulted but as a vivid and vivacious pattern for their daily lives –

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These words of God should stretch their minds and "hit them in the guts" say on a regular basis. They were to be talked of in community and passed on to future generations and always there were to be pointed to as a source of life; to forget them, to ignore them or simply to remain untouched by them was/is the way of death.

In Jesus we see the embodiment of that word of Law, that word of Life, that word of Judgement. The authority which his hearers recognised in the words that Jesus spoke come from the indwelling word of God within him – he becomes the embodiment of those words of Deuteronomy – "you shall put these words of mine in your heart and soul". He performs the word, he enacts the word, he becomes the word. He expresses the inexpressible in his very flesh and blood.

The late Michael Mayne in his wonderful book "This Sunrise of Wonder" tells the story of Schumann playing a new piece of music to some critics. "What does it mean?" they asked him. "It means this," he said and played it all over again.

What do you mean? they asked Jesus. "I mean this" he said took the bread that was the Word made flesh and blessed and broke and shared it.

Perhaps what Schumann was saying and what we see in the life and death of Jesus is that the things that arise from the untouchable depths of our soul come in words that are not merely spoken but have to be performed, enacted and made real.

The American theologian Stanley Hauerwas writes of the life of discipleship as "performing the faith".

"The church," he says, is called to perform the good news of God's redeeming love in Christ. That is its vocation. Good performers of the Christian faith, like good musicians are those

who have refined the art of allowing themselves to be played by the work even as they perform it.”

You shall put these words of mine in your heart and soul

Jesus said to his disciples : "Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven

Perhaps the best words, and the most faithful performance of the words that dwell in our heart and soul are those that lead us beyond self-justification or self-promotion or even beyond proclamations of “Lord, Lord”, into silence, into awe, and into inexpressible longing.

Some things lead us into the realm beyond words.... It is like that small mirror in the fairy-tales.... You glance in it and what you see is not yourself; for an instant you glimpse the inaccessible, where no horse or magic carpet can take you. And the soul cries out for it.
(Alexander Solzhenitsyn)