

Sunday 18 June 2006: The First Sunday After Trinity

Living with a vision of the kingdom of God

1 Corinthians 5. 6-10 and 14-17; Mark 4.26-36

After the hard work last Sunday of trying to say what it is we believe in God the Trinity, One God in Three persons, this week in our collect and readings in church, we settle down to the task of trying to live in that belief. I'm not sure that ethics are any easier than doctrine but I am sure they are related. What we believe shapes what we do.

An elderly monk I used to know when I was first ordained always seemed to think I was better than I am. His holiness, it was more than goodness, and his willingness to assume that same holiness in me, seemed to make something possible I really only half sensed for myself. Meeting him always made me feel better and that I could succeed in aiming higher.

Probably we all have a few people who have done that for us. Nelson Mandela does it for the world. When he walks into a room, it's as if everyone grows by three inches. He makes us feel taller. Speaking in Trafalgar Square last year ahead of the G8 Summit, we really did believe we could Make Poverty History.

Having a vision of who and what we can be makes a huge difference to the framework of our lives and that's what St Paul is saying in that rather dense and difficult section of 1 Corinthians we heard for the Epistle.

All that stuff about being at home or away isn't really a text about football and the World Cup, though every England supporter must be feeling that "We walk by faith, not by sight". Paul was writing about what is real, and where we find ourselves truly 'at home' and the surprise is it's not in the here and now.

For Paul, Jesus is more than the person who makes us feel better, holier, and able to stand taller in this life. He has changed the boundaries of our existence so that this life is no longer where we are at home. What we now long for is to be what he describes as 'in Christ', at one and at home with God. In Christ we are being drawn on by God's love into that deeper eternal reality where we will at last come home.

No matter how much we love this life, Christians are always going to be unsettled people because what we have been given is a vision of God's kingdom as it is in heaven. That is what we now know of as our home and we are going to be restless with anything less.

On yesterday's Parish Awayday about how we live with conflict and disagreement, Simon Keyes from St Ethelburga's Centre for Peace and Reconciliation, took as a key text Psalm 85 verse 10:

"Truth and mercy have met together,
Justice and peace have kissed each other".

Once we have even glimpsed the possibility that this might be so, we cannot settle for anything less.

Someone who had been in Hamburg after the end of the Second World War was given a marvellous image of what it means to live in the present with this sort of belief. It was, I

think, 1947, and he was responsible for Jews embarking on a boat that would take them to Palestine and Israel. They were gaunt and it was obvious they had been through hell. The sky was overcast and grey. One, wrapped in an overcoat but who had no other belongings, walked on to the ship holding a pair of sunglasses. They were a fantastic statement of belief and hope in the journey he was now making. He was going to the Promised Land and it would be beautiful and sunny and then he would need the sun glasses which for the time being he carried in faith.

It was another German, the Protestant martyr Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who said that it was difficult in his day to believe in God, as indeed it is in ours. He suggested that what we have to do is live *as if* we believed in God. This isn't an elaborate fantasy and wish fulfilment but a serious and disciplined Christian discipleship based on the certain hope of what Christ has already done for us. In Christ, we have a vision of God's kingdom and can no longer feel at home with anything less.

You can see the link with Jesus's parables of the Kingdom that were our Gospel reading from Mark "The kingdom of God is like a seed...that yields a harvest". Even more strongly, it's like a mustard seed, which is said to be the smallest of seeds from which comes the greatest of all shrubs. The potential in this small seed is going to be released. It's not clear whether the Kingdom is in the potential of the seed, the growth of the plant, or whether it's not until the harvest, but there is an inevitability about what is now going to happen. Look too, and live by it.

But be careful because there's the potential for a sting in the tale. One of Simon Keyes' opening remarks yesterday (at the Parish Conference) was that at St Ethelburga's they work with two propositions:

Faith is a source of conflict
and
Faith is a resource for transforming conflict.

That Christians live by faith, with hope, and believing in the power of the Holy Spirit to lead us into all truth ought to suggest that of and by ourselves we haven't got it all sorted and can't. We might be cautious about developing an exclusive religious view of 'we right, you wrong'. It is a besetting sin of religion in our world.

I have met Jesus several times, twice in my last parish. There was a young man, Claremont, who used to call at the Vicarage in the small hours of the night, unbearably anxious and unable to be by himself. For a while he would come and wake me up, have a conversation, calm down and go home. He thought he was Jesus.

Then there was a single parent, Tony, who had a tremendous commitment to his son but who lived pretty close to the edge of coping and not coping. He thought he was Jesus. I rather admired Cardinal Hume on a visit to the RC church in the parish for the way he coped when Tony told him off for not recognising him.

It was only a matter of time before Tony was sectioned and found himself forcibly in the local Psychiatric hospital. I went to see him, but the first person I met in the locked unit was Claremont. I introduced them to each other, and left. They became firm friends and looked after each other pretty well for a couple of years when they were back at home. It became something of a model of ministry for me. Introduce people to Jesus, and let God provide the growth.