

## Sunday 22 June 2008: The Fifth Sunday after Trinity

### The glimpse of glory

**Readings: Romans 6: 1b-11; Matthew 10: 24-39**

*'Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword. For I have come to set a man against his father and a daughter against her mother.'*

The day will come when Jesus will stand between his disciples and their closest relatives: father, mother, son, daughter. Those words of the gospel are just as formidable as the summons that Jesus addresses to us a few verses on 'whoever does not take up the cross and follow me is not worthy of me'.

At first we might hope that those rather harsh words, when seen alongside the many others that are much more comforting, aren't intended for us and that we could, perhaps, escape from them. Or we might want to think that they're intended only for a tiny part of Jesus' flock - those we perhaps think of as the 'super-spiritual' - those who have clearly dedicated their lives in some obvious and public way to carrying the cross - but not for the rest of us more ordinary souls.

I was struck recently by an interview I read with a member of a pop group. You probably won't be surprised that I'm afraid I know nothing about the group in question though I think I have heard their name before! But they were big in the 90's I understand and are now in the middle of a come-back tour after not having played together for a number of years.

This particular member described having been quite heavily involved in the occult when the band was at its peak but it was through those experiences and the sense that there must also be a light side amongst so much darkness that he started to pray. A few years later he was baptised. In the interview he went on to say, and this is what really struck me, that he doesn't find it difficult being a Christian. I wondered whether he's ever read today's Gospel and, if so, what he made of it. It's terrific, of course, that he's found faith but, as for many of us, his journey is really only just beginning. We're still at the foothills and the climb will be hard as we slip and slither and grow short of breath and of oxygen. We need the help and support of others on the way and the encouragement of occasional glimpses of glory if we're not to fall back or simply remain pottering around the comfort zone of the nursery slopes.

What a ring of truth there is in that saying that, when 95% of a task is done, we're half way there. Marathon runners feel that when they 'hit the wall' with only a few miles left to go, our fund-raising for the building project could feel a bit like that, hovering teasingly with just two million more to raise, a tiny proportion of the total already gathered in and yet the finishing line feels tantalisingly just out of reach. Sometimes that last bit of effort seems to take more out of us than the rest of the task put together and I think that may reflect something of our journey towards God, the journey on which God is wanting to draw us. With each step we take and each tiny bit of understanding that we may develop the demands seem to intensify if we're going to sustain the course.

For some, the journey will always be a struggle, right from the beginning but, for others, like the member of the band, it may feel deceptively easy and without real challenge at first, with a

comforting, feel good factor high on the agenda. And if that's our experience then the demands that Jesus makes, if we ever really come to face them, can be a shock and a severe test of our faith.

The Bishop of Durham once recalled how he was asked to go back to preach at his old school. It was at one of those annual events when the idea is to remember the great pioneers who founded the school, developed it and gave it its character. And that's fine in one way. We've probably all experienced something like that and, indeed, a few weeks ago some old boys of a school whose founder had links with this church came back here for their annual memorial service and were able to see, for the first time, the lamp they gave in his memory many years ago hanging in its new position in the sanctuary.

Tom Wright did preach, as requested, on the subject of the pioneers of his school but he had a take on the topic which wasn't, perhaps, quite what had been expected and, initially anyway, caused a mild stir. He pointed out that something rather odd was going on. All the men and women that the present pupils were bidden to honour had been innovators. They were the ones who had dared to do things differently and to go in new directions despite the people who wanted to keep things as they were. But by reading a list of their names out in a solemn voice and by holding them up as founding figures the present generation was in danger of doing just the opposite - of saying that it wanted everything to stay the way it always had been. What is the right and appropriate way, the bishop asked, to honour the memory of these pioneering innovators - to stick closely to the well trodden path or to dare to do something different?

His words were a challenge and did cause something of a stir but not on anything like the same scale, of course, as the effects Jesus' words can have on us. 'I have not come to bring peace, but a sword. I have come to set a man against his father and a daughter against her mother.' and 'whoever does not take up the Cross and follow me is not worthy of me.'

What's going on? It can be really hard for us to equate those words with the more obviously loving Jesus we may feel more comfortable with. Can this really be the same person speaking these stern and uncomfortable words that we shouldn't ignore? And, indeed, down the centuries and still today, in 2008, many Christians are still toiling up the slopes where the air may be thin at times and life a real struggle but they seem to be sustained by the glimpse of glory and supported by each other and by the tenderness and care of the Holy Spirit of Jesus.

Think of our brothers and sisters in Zimbabwe, especially in Harare. Very many are suffering badly in that place but if we think for a moment of our fellow Anglicans who the Zimbabwean government associates with this country and who, therefore, seem to be being singled out at the moment. All the Anglican churches in that diocese have now been barred to worshippers except to the small numbers who support the now deposed bishop who gave Mugabe succour and who seemed to see the diocese as a place for setting up his own power base. Over the past month the police have interfered with and obstructed services and committed acts of violence against congregations. Just try and imagine what that would be like if it happened here.

A retired bishop has been brought back to look after the diocese in the terrible situation in which it finds itself. Recently he wrote a pastoral letter to his parishes in which he said 'Our struggle to worship without harassment continues. We are not, however, deterred by this lawlessness and will continue to seek justice through the courts. As a diocese we will look for alternative worship places to ensure that members of our congregations remain united as we struggle for freedom of

worship. We will never cease to worship. We also believe, whether the police like it or not, that God will intervene, maybe not today or tomorrow, but in His own time. We will rejoice when this happens.'

Recently the Presiding Bishop of the Episcopal Church in the United States, who will be preaching for us next month, asked the Bishop of Massachusetts to go to Zimbabwe in order to show solidarity with the people there who are living out the truth of those hard words of Jesus. When the Bishop came back he said 'To see these Christian men and women in the face of great persecution was a very powerful experience. One of the priests there said to me "You can take away our jobs, you can physically threaten us but you cannot take away our faith".'

The election in Zimbabwe, if it happens, is in five days time and the violence towards the church and towards all those who dissent seems to be increasing. Today's Gospel is addressed to all those living in chaotic times where families are disrupted, boundaries broken down, truth devalued and violence close at hand. And Bishop Bakare's words to his people ring out 'We believe that God will intervene. Maybe not today or tomorrow but in His own time.'

That is, that God's covenant stands good, even when his people have messed things up. That if we take our stand with Christ he will be our advocate.