

10th September 2006: The 13th Sunday after Trinity

‘I am not a painter of appearances’

Readings: James 2:1-10, 14-17; Mark 7: 24-end

‘ I am a representational painter, but not a painter of appearances. I paint representational pictures of emotional situations’.

Those are the words of the artist Howard Hodgkin who has a major retrospective on at the Tate at the moment. When Hodgkin first began to paint, in the 1950’s, his work was recognisable, just about (!), for what it represented but, as the years passed he became neither a wholly abstract nor wholly figurative painter. His work is still very definitely of specific friends, occasions or places but you or I would be hard pushed to realise that other than from the titles. For what he does, in brilliant and wonderful colour, using an array of dots, stripes, shapes and overlapping planes is to paint his reaction to a situation rather than the situation itself. He tells a story in a rather unique way that can open up new channels for us.

I always find it interesting to observe the other people visiting a gallery. The slow movement round the exhibits means you often see the same people several times. You wonder what’s brought them there, what their back story is, how what they’re looking at will affect them and what they’ll take away with them. Just as in any place where a lot of people are brought together there will be those who seem focussed and purposeful and those who appear more aimless. We see them, we know that each has their own story but we never ask, of course we don’t. We’re strangers to each other, thrown together by chance.

Often, our own lives may feel a bit fragmented. There may be work, family, holidays, times of isolation but the pace of life and the temptation to allow distractions in often means that we may rarely really reflect on our own lives as a single story with a shape to it.

But it does sometimes happen. I was in church doing a chaplains slot recently. A man had been sitting quietly in one of the pews for some time and then got up to leave. I happened to be in his path and he started to talk – to relate his story. He obviously wasn’t in a hurry! He was over here from the United States with his family on holiday. For all of them it was a first trip abroad. It was his 16 year old daughter’s idea to come. She’d been a mad Harry Potter fan as she was growing up and had become a devoted Anglophile from a distance. She very much wanted to come to London and so her father, realising that it might not be very long before she’d be off and no longer having holidays with the family, had arranged their visit. So, while his wife , daughter and the rest of the family were off shopping he’d decided to come into St Martin’s- as so often this was a place that, for him, was familiar from countless recordings.

He spoke of how he’d grown up in an Episcopalian church family but had dropped out at the earliest opportunity – when he was about 8 I think. When he married he would have described himself as an atheist of many years standing but his wife, as it happened, was a church-goer although of a rather different flavour from that he’d grown up with. Although church meant nothing to him and he’d actually much rather have been at a ball-game he went faithfully with his wife and growing family every week for 13 years because he took his marriage seriously , church was important to his wife and he wanted to honour her. But, truth to tell, most of the time during those 13 years his mind was elsewhere during the service.

From his description, I would imagine that the pastor of that church knew him pretty well, understood the situation and accepted him as he was.

And then, one day, the scripture reading was from Mark, Chapter 7. 'A woman whose little daughter had an unclean spirit immediately heard about Jesus and she came and bowed down at his feet. Now the woman was a Gentile of Syrophenician origin...' The gospel we heard this morning. It's not an easy read. It's one of those difficult passages of scripture. It's pretty challenging really in various ways. It's not the most obvious story to get a clear picture of at first reading – a bit like one of those Howard Hodgkin paintings really and then, when you start to dig into it a little, we may think we find words of Jesus that cut right across our ideas of being inclusive and we get a reminder that Jesus' mission was, first and foremost, to the Jews which is something we sometimes forget. The woman criticises him for his exclusivity as she shows how there can be a place for non-Jews in God's plan. It can all feel a bit shocking really.

And so this story was being read in a church, somewhere in the States, 6 years ago. Our visitor had, as usual, half a mind on something else while the scripture was read when suddenly he opened his eyes and saw, in front of him, a vision he knew immediately to be Christ. It was fleeting but it was to change his life from that day on. He was still sceptical and he wanted to test this thing out so he waited for a year but it didn't fade. At that point he and one of his children were baptised at the same time. Though he'd clearly led a good life and a life full of faithfulness to his family, those few seconds 6 years ago transformed it. One of the really difficult bits of scripture had changed everything. If he tells friends about it and tries to tell them something of the story of his life, which definitely has a shape to it now – they laugh and say 'surely not you?' but it remains more real to him than anything and has clearly had the most profound effect on every aspect of his being.

Not many of us may have had an experience quite like that but it perhaps throws some light on the ways in which God may speak to us. Sometimes in the most unexpected ways or the most difficult circumstances. Here was a died-in-the-wool non-believer, brought to faith not by one of the more obvious stories of loving pastoral care and concern or calls for justice but by a story that, initially anyway, can seem to speak of exclusion and harshness.

People not infrequently talk about the stumbling block they find in hard passages of scripture. When you look carefully there are quite a lot of them in the NT but of course it's often the Hebrew scriptures that people find the most difficult – in their sometimes war like and violent nature and the way they seem to want to drag God into that on their own terms. And that sometimes leads people to give up on the OT altogether – particularly when the world is going through the sort of travails it is at the moment.

But it was through one of the hard stories that our visitor was brought to believe in a loving God – a God who wanted to include him – a non-believer. When we've heard or read a passage many times the natural tendency is probably to read it in the same way that we always have and to expect the same things from it but, if God is still alive and involved in our lives and the life of the world, then what we need to be doing is saying 'What is this passage saying to me today?' To try and read it afresh each time and not to come to it with pre-conceived ideas about what we might expect. Scripture has the power to change lives and to help us draw together the thread of our life stories that may feel more like a series of apparently unrelated dots, stripes or blotches, however highly coloured or, indeed, monochrome, they may be.

Of course, God speaks to us in all sorts of ways, in the circumstances of our lives, through the people in our lives, through the world around us but also, and perhaps we sometimes overlook this when we strive to treat it as something we study – ‘Have you done your Bible study today?’ – through scripture.

Though written by fallible, flawed human beings, through scripture we can hear God speaking to us – today. We can receive that and take it to heart as addressed to **us** – as God breathes life into us. We can pray with scripture. We can wonder at scripture. We can engage with it and live with it in our lives day by day. Even, sometimes, the most unlikely and unexpected passages. Perhaps God might be wanting to say to us ‘I am not a painter of appearances. I am a painter of something much more wonderful’.