

Sermon

Sunday 21st September, 2008

Lessons

Proverbs 3: 13 – 18

St Matthew 9: 9 – 13

And as Jesus passed forth from thence, he saw a man, named Matthew, sitting at the receipt of custom: and he saith unto him, *Follow me.* And he rose, and followed him.

Matthew 9: 9

On 2nd November, 2003, in a large hockey rink on the campus of New Hampshire University, before a crowd of 3000 people, 300 press, a 200 strong choir and 48 bishops, Gene Robinson, wearing a bullet-proof jacket under his vestments, was consecrated as the ninth Bishop of New Hampshire. He is the first openly gay man to be called by a diocese to such a position. Five months earlier, in June of that year, Robinson, together with hundreds of his supporters, gathered at St Paul's Church, Concord, to hear if he had been elected. Of that June morning, Robinson writes:

The atmosphere at St Paul's Church, Concord, on that summer morning was electric. The Holy Spirit seemed so palpably present that people spoke of their hair standing up on their necks. While the first ballots were being counted, you could have heard a pin drop, as people sat silently or knelt humbly in prayer. When the final result was read, announcing my election as the ninth Bishop of New Hampshire, a rush of wind swept through the congregation as people rose to their feet to applaud, cheer, laugh, cry, and rejoice. People who were there still refer to it as one of the most moving and powerful experiences of God in their lifetimes.

Gene Robinson is 61 years old. He grew up in what he warmly describes as a 'Bible-believing congregation of the Disciples of Christ Church.' Every Sunday morning, from ten until eleven, every member of the church, young and old, went to Sunday School, and the study, he says, was always and only about Scripture. From eleven to twelve, the church worshipped God, always from the perspective of Scripture. Of himself, his family and his church community, Robinson said:

We were steeped in the sacred Jewish and Christian texts, and we believed that compliance with their teachings was the key to understanding God, discerning God's will for us, and claiming the salvation won for us on the cross.

Speaking in very personal terms about his faith and, if you like, his conversion, Robinson says, 'I *love* the Bible. With no reservation, no holding back.' I *love* the Bible. Of that love, he says this:

The experience I had as a child and as a teenager that sealed my love for the Bible was this – and I consider it a miracle, a theophany: I heard God's voice coming through those scriptures. I wasn't like other boys, and the thought scared me to death. My church was using words of scripture to say that people who were attracted to others of the same sex were despicable, an 'abomination,' in the eyes of God. And yet – and here's the miracle – I heard God saying to me the words God said to Jesus at his baptism: 'You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.' It may not make any sense to anyone reading these words, but I swear to you that despite what my church was teaching, I heard God's voice in scripture saying to me – to *me!* – 'You are my beloved.' And it saved my life.

Robinson says, 'I love the Bible. With no reservation, no holding back.' He can say that because through the Scriptures God spoke to him and saved his life.

William Franklin Graham Jr, better known as Billy Graham, evangelist, spiritual advisor to a number of US Presidents, and a man, who in 2002 could claim a lifetime of audiences on radio and television of over two billion people, became a Christian at the age of sixteen. At an evening service, following the preaching of Dr Ham, the young Billy Graham, with others, went forward to commit himself to Christ. Of his journey towards commitment, Billy Graham wrote:

What was slowly dawning on me during those weeks was the miserable realisation that I did not know Jesus Christ for myself. I could not depend on my parents' faith. Christian influence in the home could have a lasting impact on a child's life, but faith could not be passed on as an inheritance, like the family silver. It had to be exercised by each individual'

I could not depend on my church membership either. Saying 'I believe' in the Apostles' Creed every Sunday, or taking the bread and wine of Communion, could so easily become nothing but rote and ritual, without power in themselves to make me any different.

Nor could I depend on my resolution to do better. I constantly failed in my efforts at self-improvement. Nobody needed to tell me that.

Following the sermon of Dr Ham, the Invitation to accept Christ and the gentle reminder from Scripture given by the preacher, 'God commandeth his love toward us, in that, while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us,' Billy Graham walked forward. The congregation sang the hymn, *Almost persuaded, Now to believe*. The second verse runs:

Almost persuaded, come, come today.
Almost persuaded, turn not away.
Jesus invites you here
Angels are lingering near
Pray'rs rise from hearts so dear
O wand'rer, come!

With the words of Scripture on his heart and mind, the words of the song on his lips, the young man stepped forward. Let's listen to Graham's story:

I heard the message, and I felt the inner compulsion to go forward. Now came the moment to commit myself to Christ. Intellectually, I accepted Christ to the extent that I acknowledged what I knew about Him to be true. That was mental assent. Emotionally, I felt that I wanted to love Him in return for His loving me. But the final issue was whether I would turn myself over to His rule in my life.

I had been brought up to regard my baptism and confirmation as professions of faith....The difference was that this time I was doing it on purpose, doing it with intention. For all my previous religious

upbringing and church activity, I believe that that was the moment I made my real commitment to Jesus Christ.

No bells went off inside me. No signs flashed across the tabernacle ceiling. No physical palpitations made me tremble. I wondered...if I was a hypocrite, not to be weeping or something. I simply felt at peace. Quiet, not delirious. Happy and peaceful.

[That night in my room] and for the first time in my life got down on my knees without being told to do so. I really wanted to talk to God. 'Lord, I don't know what happened to me tonight. *You* know. And I thank You for the privilege I've had tonight.'

With the words of Scripture on his heart and mind, Billy Graham committed himself to Christ. Jesus said to the tax collector, Matthew, *Follow me*. And he rose, and followed him. People of quite different theological outlooks, different backgrounds, different continents and cultures, and people across two thousand years of history have heard God speak to them *personally* in Jesus.

I believe that the Church for two thousand years has struggled to put into words what it believes of Jesus. In every age, theologians have tried to encapsulate who Jesus was and is. In the Byzantine era, Jesus is the Pantocrator, the Almighty, the All-Powerful, he is God Almighty who is all-sufficient. In the Middle Ages, he is the 'man of sorrows' and in South America today, in Liberation Theology, Jesus is the 'friend of the poor.' The Church knows Jesus to be an historical character but it also knows Him as its Living Lord. From the earliest days of the Christian community and for two thousand years since, the Church has searched for concepts capable of doing justice to their experience of Jesus.

In the Pauline epistles, which are the earliest writings in the New Testament, the title 'Lord' applied to Jesus is nearly 230 times. The fact that Paul can apply to Jesus Old Testament texts which in their original setting refer to God Himself should shock us for it surely shocked first century Jews. The great Christological hymn in Philippians speaks of the exalted Jesus at whose name 'every knee shall bow and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.' This is an unmistakable echo of a passage about God in Isaiah. Paul opens almost all his epistles with the greeting, 'Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.' John Polkinghorne writes:

[That] is a very strange [greeting.] God and Jesus are bracketed together, without any apparent feeling of incongruity. (How unthinkable it would have been for a Jew so to associate God and Moses.) God is the Lord and yet Jesus is Lord also, without the two being identified.

This bracketing of God and Jesus together is 'nothing short of astounding, when one considers that this new formula of God and Jesus is written by monotheistic Jews with reference to a figure of recent past history.' The first Christians are struggling to do justice to the Christ-event while at the same time hold on to the Israelite assertion that 'The Lord our God is one Lord.' Polkinghorne says, 'Their intellectual instability is manifest. Further thought must lie ahead, grappling with how the Lordship of Christ and the Lordship of God are to be reconciled and understood.'

In Scripture, Jesus is the prophet of whom Moses spoke. He is the Suffering Servant of Isaiah. He is the Second Adam of Romans and Corinthians. He is the Cosmic Christ of Colossians and, ultimately in John's Gospel, Jesus is the Word made flesh,

the Divine *logos*, the One who holds the universe in being. Over three hundred years after Jesus' death, the Church at its Second Council, the Council of Chalcedon, argued, debated and finally came to rest on the formula that Jesus is:

The only Son of God, eternally begotten of the Father,
God from God, Light from Light,
true God from true God, begotten, not made,
of one being with the Father.

In John's Gospel, John the Baptist sees Jesus and says, 'Behold the Lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world.' Had that Gospel been written at the end of the fourth century and not the first, perhaps Scripture would have the Baptist say of Jesus, 'Behold the only Son of God, eternally begotten of the Father, God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God, begotten, not made, of one being with the Father and there he is with his mother, the *theotokos*, the God-bearer!'

'The Bible is a collection of many accounts of what it is like to encounter the Living God...They are faithful accounts of the indescribable; they are words used to recount that for which there are no words: the mystery of God.' In the Church, tradition is not static. It is the ever-evolving understanding and interpretation of God in the world and, in particular, what it means to speak of God in Christ. Tradition means taking our personal experiences of God and Jesus, our testimonies, our stories and dreams, and trying to find words and concepts that do justice to what we feel in our hearts and minds. Over the years, the Church's understanding of marriage, slavery and the role of women has changed grown away from that of the Bible and tradition. Our understanding is changing as regards homosexuality. For two thousand years the

Church in each generation has wanted to express its experience of Jesus in its own terms while, at the same time, honour those who have gone before us. When Matthew rose to follow Jesus, who was he following? Did he have any better understanding of his faith than you or me? Did he have words that caught the Spirit of Jesus, that named him and defined Him for all time? No, I do not believe he did.

Matthew was no different from Gene Robinson, Billy Graham or you and me. In Jesus, he heard God speak to him. I want to finish with a very modern statement of who Jesus is, a twenty-first century understanding of who Jesus is. I turn to John Shelby Spong. I have used this quotation before but make no apology for using it again. Here Spong eloquently states that the supreme humanity of Jesus is the most distinctive mark of his divinity. We are hearing a fresh expression of Christology.

Spong writes:

Jesus is arrested. He is alone. He is doomed. His life is near its end, but watch and observe the portrait the gospel writers painted of how he died: He was betrayed but he loved his betrayer. He was forsaken but he loved those who forsook him. His arrest was challenged but he demanded that his defenders put up their swords. He was falsely accused but he was silent in the face of his accusers. There was nothing defensive about him. Even when he was mocked and tormented, he loved his mockers and tormentors. He was scourged and he loved his scourgers. He was denied and he loved his denier. He was crucified and he loved his killers. Hostility and rejection, abuse and death – these did not diminish his humanity. That is a portrait of a fully human one who has no need to hate or to hurt.

I have no doubt that behind the gospel stories there is an historical character, a man, whose inspired these stories. At the foot of the cross, a Gentile Roman Centurion said, ‘Truly this man was the Son of God!’ Jesus said to Matthew, *Follow me.*

And he rose, and followed him. Amen.