

Sermon Notes from 10 am service 20 June 2010

## Sharing in the death of Christ

The two passages we have just heard face us head on with the central paradox of our faith – the proclamation that the death of Christ is good news. The crucifixion of Jesus was a terrible thing - the devastation of all the hopes of his followers. But the mystery at the heart of our faith is that when Jesus' friends reflected on the dreadful thing that had happened, it made them think of the redeeming love of God. *Not simply of the love of Jesus, but of the love of God.* When they write about the crucifixion, they do not talk about the love of Jesus, they talk about the love of God. So Paul wrote: 'God commends his own love towards us, in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us'(Romans 5,8). John 3.16 said: ' God so loved the world that he gave his only son'. The epistle of John (I John 4,10) says: 'Herein is love, not that we loved God, but that he first loved us and sent his son to achieve the reconciliation of our sins'.

Why? Not because the crucifixion was followed by the resurrection. You can see from what they wrote their conviction that the death of Jesus had been brought about by God, that Jesus' death had in some way fulfilled God's purpose.

The writers of the NT were well aware that their message was counter-intuitive: 'the message of the cross is sheer folly to those on their way to destruction' said Paul; but to us who are on the way to salvation, it is the power of God'. So what do we find in the two passages? Matthew records Jesus' words: 'No-one is worthy of me who does not take up his cross and follow me. Whoever gains his life will lose it; whoever loses his life for my sake will gain it'. Paul picks up the same theme: 'When we were baptised into union with Christ Jesus, we were baptised into his death...in order that as Christ was raised from the dead by the glorious power of the Father, so we might set out on a new life'.

All of this is celebrated in the great triumphal statement of Paul (2 Cor 5,18): 'God was in Christ, reconciling the world to himself'. For most people, Jesus is a tragic heroic figure who died because he refused to compromise his integrity. For people of faith, he reveals who God is, the humble, loving giving heart of reality; he is for us the secret Way to human fulfilment, the source of our salvation, the Word of God to us in human form.

Therefore Paul says: 'If we identify with Christ in his death, we believe that we shall also live with him'. And Jesus says to us, 'Whoever gains his life will lose it; whoever loses his life for my sake will gain it'.

But how do we identify with Christ? We find some markers in today's gospel: we are bidden 'Not to fear those who kill the body, but have no power to kill the soul'. Integrity and spiritual values really are the source of our life. Abandoning them for material advantage or wasting the time of our life on the amazing diet of trivialities which the society which we have created offers us, is an effective way to deaden sensibility and kill the soul. Coming to worship provides a rare opportunity to think your own thoughts (even during sermons!) on what you need to nourish your soul.

The second marker is the amazing vision of Jesus that although two sparrows are sold for a penny, not one of them falls to the ground without God's knowledge and the conclusion that we should not be afraid, because we are worth more than any number of sparrows. At the heart of our faith is the conviction that the love of God is always there for all of us. Whatever happens in our lives, we do not need to be afraid because the ultimate reality is God's love for each of us. This also means that no-one is expendable, no-one is to be valued highly or lowly at the expense of anyone else. That is why the discriminatory way casualties are reported in Iraq and Afghanistan is the direct opposite of everything we believe about the equal value of all people.

But the words of Jesus I want to concentrate on are his words about witness: 'Whoever will acknowledge me before others, I will acknowledge before my Father in heaven: and whoever disowns me before others, I will disown before my Father in heaven'. I want to share with you an article that Kenneth Leech wrote in the 1980's about the nature of the Christian church. Leech said that the church should be a counter-society which through its life and practice can offer a 'contrasting model' to that of dominant society. This counter-society is made up of small groups of friends concerned with the reconstruction of new forms of community wherever we live. We have some experience of it here in our church, in our activities and groups e.g. the parents and toddlers group, the open foyer, our support for people when they are sick or dying, concern for homeless people and the Shower project, the street pastors and, not least, the opportunity to dance. Out of such networks new ideas of community, new models of what it is to be the church in the

world will emerge. We need always to be aware that what the church is in its life carries more meaning than what it says.

However, while this is wonderful, on its own it's not sufficient. Leech said that what we do for society and people in need must be underpinned and informed by a shared commitment to what we have learned (and continue to learn) of Christ. Otherwise we will run out of steam and end up in a general liberalism. The insight of Paul is that Christian life is about an identification with the death of Christ. So our community must be centred round the constant recalling of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth. Christian communities are those which have at their centre the 'subversive memory' of Jesus and the continual inspiration of his spirit. Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Martin Luther King were witnesses to what happens when people live with the subversive memory of Jesus. In the place where we live we are responsible for sustaining the memory of him in whose dying we discern the transformative presence of God. We are to be one of those communities which in our faithfulness to the subversive memory of Jesus provide hope for all people – and stimulate resistance to the destructive, nightmarish options for human fulfilment which are so prominently offered in our society. We are the community who share the pity of Jesus for the people of his day who were like sheep without a shepherd, because when we were ourselves in the wilderness, God met us in his son and brought us home:

“Dying and living, he declared God’s love, gave us grace, and opened the gate of glory. May we who share Christ’s body live his risen life; we who drink his cup bring life to others; we whom the spirit lights give light to the world. Keep us firm in the hope that you have set before us, so we and all your children shall be free, and whole earth live to praise your name; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.”