

Sermon for 2nd Sunday after Trinity 2021

Personally, the last two weeks have seemed a bit of a jolt church-wise. Prior to that we were up in the peaks of the Easter season and Pentecost and then Trinity Sunday. It was glorious. But now, courtesy of the readings from early in Mark's gospel, we find ourselves down on the dusty lanes of discipleship following Jesus about. A lot of his talk seems to be in parables and there's quite a lot of agro going on, whether from the religious authorities or even from family. Last week when things were getting heated out in the public square Jesus' own relations turned up to take charge of him, there was talk that he was out of his mind. Possibly the disciples had family issues of their own, having left parents and others behind in order to follow Jesus. Whether they'd been ostracised or not for doing so is uncertain – but that's certainly been the experience of many Christians down the ages, especially in certain parts of the world.

Thinking of Jesus and his teaching - why did he use parables, which are essentially simple stories designed to make a moral or spiritual point? I think there might be two reasons. Firstly, people like stories, especially if they can relate to them. That's why Jesus chose familiar topics such as farming or losing things. Stories are often easy to remember and can be repeated, thought about and chewed over with your friends. They can be true or made up. Who will ever forget Colonel Sir Tom Moore walking 100 laps of his garden to fundraise for the NHS? That's a modern parable about commitment. Secondly, parables are very useful if you want to introduce new and challenging ideas which, if presented directly, might be misunderstood, especially by those in power. For example, if you were talking about the Kingdom of God, not as an armed rising to throw the Romans invaders out of your country, but rather as something involving loving sacrificial service which challenges authority not by force but by example, and which may proceed in small steps rather than big leaps, then a parable might be good way in. There's a nice touch in the first parable we heard today about the growing seed when Jesus says "The kingdom of God is as if someone would scatter seed on the ground, and would sleep and rise night and day, and the seed would sprout and grow, he does not know how." The man in question may not be a botanist, but in effect by sleeping and rising every day he's doing what the seed does in its own way and with a rather different timescale – both of them alternate between being rather quiet and then very active. It's all part of nature and the pattern of life and provides great story material.

This strategy of Jesus in using parables also accounts for the fact that he explained their meaning to the disciples but not to the crowds. It wasn't that he was hiding his light under a bushel it was a question of timing. Meanwhile, I imagine that if there were individuals in the crowd who wanted to hear more, and were seen as genuine enquirers, they would be told more and might even become followers. In that case the parables would have acted as a sort of initial filter process. But as far as the disciples were concerned, it was very important that they got the explanations and other special treatment because one of Jesus' primary tasks was to train them up as the building blocks of the future church, not least Peter of course.

Their being with Jesus, hearing his teaching, seeing the miracles, witnessing key events (the transfiguration, crucifixion, resurrection, ascension) and then experiencing Pentecost were all part of preparing and equipping them for the task ahead. And the focus in all of this was the Kingdom of God with Jesus at the centre. The Christian gospel is not a do-it-yourself self-help course in spirituality to hand out to the crowds but rather a transforming relationship with Jesus which is best shared with others by those who have already experienced it.

Such a relationship, and the effects of it, is exactly what Paul is talking about in 2 Corinthians chapter 5. And he does so using some of the most memorable language in the Epistles. The context here is that Paul's own ministry had been challenged by the Corinthians and he is seeking to vindicate himself. "We live by faith, not by sight", he says. "We must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ. Since, then, we know what it is to fear the Lord, we try to persuade others." Paul is who he is because of Christ's love, a love which constrains and urges us on, a love shown most especially on the cross and which in return seeks to evoke our love and our re-evaluation, of ourselves and of others. Christ died for all and therefore we should regard no one merely from a human point of view, which of course is how Paul himself had once regarded Jesus. But now he was a changed man and he was challenging the Corinthians to change too. "If anyone is in Christ," he says, "the new creation has come: the old has gone. God has reconciled us to himself through Christ and has given us the ministry of reconciliation. We are therefore Christ's ambassadors."

It's wonderful stuff and it comes straight from the heart. What might it mean for us today? Well, it's a very inclusive message. Previously Paul as a strict orthodox Jew had been part of a very exclusive faith but he now sees that God in Christ wants to reach out to all people to be part of his kingdom. Every Christian can be an ambassador for Christ – take a moment and reflect on what that might mean for you in your particular situation. The challenge for all of us is to see people as God does and put prejudice aside - as we find, for example, in *Call the Midwife* which, in its modest and wholesome way, is another type of modern parable demonstrating openness and caring for the residents of Poplar, being firm but not judgmental. If you tell me that you can watch it without sometimes crying I won't believe you. And 'walking by faith' begins with one step at a time, looking to God. Be encouraged by that if you're struggling with something at the moment and perhaps ask someone else to support you, we don't have to walk alone. Let's remember too that God's Spirit may work in hidden ways, like a seed planted in the ground, and also unexpectedly - as Paul explained to the Philippian church in one of his later letters, reassuring them that his being in prison at the time was not a great setback as they'd imagined but was actually serving to advance the gospel.

Let's remember Paul's words tomorrow morning when we're preparing for another week of the nitty gritty challenges, opportunities and surprises which make up the Christian life, and let's ask God to open the eyes of our hearts to see as he does. Even from down on the dusty lanes of discipleship we can still look up and glimpse the peaks. *Amen*