

Sermon – Trinity 6 2017

The Lord being my helper

This month has been a bit of walk down memory lane. Sunday 3rd July 1977 was the day of my ordination to the diaconate. And forty years on it was a thrill to be involved at the cathedral when the new deacons were ordained on 1st July. Squirrelled away in the attic I recently unearthed papers from my ordination : the Deacon's Orders, the Declaration of Assent and Licence authorising me to serve as stipendiary curate. I even found my first job description – hand written by my incumbent at our first staff meeting. It listed what he saw to be the chief fields of activity. Preaching happens to be at the top of the list. It states: “to achieve effectiveness in communication with economy and concentrated use of preparation time”. Well I can't speak for effectiveness but as my wife and family will verify the 'economic use of preparation time' is still very much a work in progress!

But as I reacquainted myself with that job description and that staff meeting, my mind went back to the ordination itself. I remember the congregation was wonderfully welcoming - the extended family and friends wonderfully supportive yet, as Margaret and I waved goodbye to the last of our guests, I experienced the most profound feeling of anxiety – of unworthiness - of self-doubt – of not knowing whether I could do this!

In the ordinal there's this list of declarations that the person to be ordained must respond to.

Will you accept the discipline of the Church ?

Will you be diligent in prayer ... and the reading of holy scripture?

Will you fashion your life and that of your household according to the way of Christ?

Will you promote unity, peace and love among all Christian people?

And the response given is simply, or was then,

‘I will, the Lord being my helper’.

And it was that phrase ‘the Lord being my helper’, that I needed to learn to trust as I launched out into the deep ... unclear of the journey that lay ahead.

That’s one reason why I enjoy hearing again the OT story of Jacob and his experience at Bethel. This for him was a liminal moment, his having reached a new frontier in his story of personal struggle.

To recap he had usurped his twin brother’s birthright and blessing and a consequence of his ill-gotten legacy required him to leave Be'er Sheba and journey towards Charan, to his uncle Laban's home where a marriage was to be arranged. While traveling, Jacob encountered "the place" (Mount Moriah) and since the sun had set, he lay down to sleep.

Here he dreamt of a stairway bridging heaven to the very spot where he lay and of heavenly beings ascending and descending the stairway. And when he awoke, was confronted by a deep realisation that this was no ordinary place, rather it was a meeting place of two frontiers – “how awesome is this place”, Jacob exclaims. And he lifted the stone where he had been resting and made of it a pillar, anointing it with oil –

“Surely the Lord is in this place and I did not know it ... This is none other than the house of God and this is the gate of heaven”.

And, in that place, Jacob made a vow to trust that God would fulfil in him the promise made to his forefather Abraham and thus he resumed his journey, leaving behind all that was familiar, going into a foreign place and into a self-imposed exile, but not an exile without hope. He was lonely, but not alone. Far from home, yet reassured. His misgivings and self-doubt were no longer the only reality. At Bethel a new frontier was traversed one that beckoned him into a deeper reality of meaning and purpose.

This familiar narrative from Genesis 28 marks a time of crisis. Before that, Jacob’s life had followed familiar paths, so he was less conscious perhaps of his deeper needs and it becomes the disruption and jarring of those familiar pathways that facilitates this liminal moment whereby he is led to a relational encounter with the living God, the God of his forebears.

In our life, too, fixed certainties have to be shaken sometimes, so that we can unearth fresh meaning and purpose - conscious at times of this to be no ordinary moment – for God’s spirit is in this space and that he has dawn near in ways that we could not previously have foreseen, or known, or understood. In ways that makes the journey ahead that much more trusting and hope-filled.

And that’s what we are meant to notice in those enduring stories about ‘wheat and tares’ and ‘mustard seeds’ and ‘leaven in the dough’ that characterise Jesus’ teaching about the kingdom. Jesus used familiar

things to describe as the psalmist remarks 'truths that lie hidden': things kept secret since the world was made.

New Testament scholar, Tom Wright, speaks of Jesus' parables not as some friendly illustration about some abstract point of theology but a means of describing the subversive truth of God's kingdom accomplishing that which it is purposed to accomplish.

And what Jesus is basically saying about the kingdom is: don't despise the small beginnings for what I (Jesus) am doing is planting seeds. They may not look much in the total scheme but they have all the potential necessary for them to grow and blossom and flourish.

Thus, if we take the case of Jesus' earthly ministry it was time bound by a few short years and restricted geographically to a few hundred square miles. If we take the number of people to whom he ministered - although considerable within a setting of first century Palestine - in contemporary terms his reach was really quite modest. Yet (and this is Wright's point),

the yeast that he stirred into the loaf, the kingdom-work he completed in a very short time and in a very small region has leavened the loaf of the whole world in a most remarkable way His way of love, forgiveness, humility and service, has woven itself into the fabric of many societies, so that even where it's ignored, people know that something happened in his life and death that changed the world.

And we are called, individually and collectively, to be leaven and seeds of God's kingdom and not despise the small beginnings that lead to greater outcomes.

We are called, individually and collectively, to embody that way of love, forgiveness, humility and service.

We are called, individually and collectively, to follow pathways that may seem unfamiliar and daunting but which lead to fresh moments of encounter. Where, because we are confronted by anxieties - thoughts of unworthiness, or self doubt, we begin to trust that we are not expected, or able, to stand in our own strength alone, but in the strength of the Lord and his capacity to be present at those frontiers of uncertainty; for us to glimpse the reality that *the Lord is in this place and I did not know it*; to be reminded of his gift of the Spirit and the promise of his grace and the assurance that there is *nothing in all creation that can separate us from his love*. Then, in the strength of *that* knowledge to go forth on life's journey 'the Lord being our helper'.

Prayer

O Lord, you have searched me, and known me.

You understand my thoughts afar off.

You compass my path and my lying down.

And are acquainted with all my ways:

for there is not a word on my tongue, but lo you know it altogether.

O you who know me so utterly, help me to know you a little.

Amen