

Bishop Richard Harries Sermon on Trinity 12

St Mary's, Barnes

Today's Gospel makes for uncomfortable listening. Last Sunday's gospel recorded a pivotal point in the ministry of Jesus when Peter confessed him to be the Christ, the Son of the Living God. Today's Gospel began with the words. "From that time Jesus began to make it clear to his disciples that he had to go to Jerusalem and endure great suffering." It is not difficult to understand how Jesus came to this conclusion. In his teaching he put before people the claims of the Kingdom of God and he knew that it was essential to carry this proclamation to the heart of the political and religious establishment in Jerusalem. He knew too that this was all too likely to lead to conflict. There is a very authentic note in this passage, for we heard how Peter blurted out "Heaven forbid... This will never happen to you." Whereupon Jesus accuses him of being a stumbling block. The very vehemence of his response seems to reveal an inner struggle. He had a tussle within himself between the natural human desire to live and what he saw would happen if he was faithful to God's purpose for him. Something of that tension emerges at this point.

This teaching about the suffering of Jesus would undergo is followed by statements that make even more uncomfortable reading.

"Anyone who wishes to be a follower of mine must renounce self; he must take up his cross and follow me." And this for millions of people has literally meant putting their lives on the line. For the first nearly 300 years of its existence Christianity was illegal and Christians were subject to spasmodic but fierce persecution. So it is today. In scores of countries today Christians are a harassed or persecuted minority.

Today's passage, as well as being a challenge to the seriousness of our discipleship, raises some difficult, fundamental questions of belief. For the Jesus of the Gospels is one who asks of us total, unqualified loyalty. If someone does this today, as political or

religious figures sometimes do, we are right to be highly suspicious. We do not trust fuhrer figures. Why should we respond to the call of Jesus for total, unconditional loyalty? What makes him different?

We need to approach this big question against a background of our whole understanding of God. First, God is not a thing in the world of things, not one item amongst others. God is the underlying and self-sufficient first cause of all secondary causes. Or to put it in the less philosophical terms of this Eucharist. "All things come from you and of your own do we give you". All things. Every atom, every electron, every cell, every complex multicellular structure depends moment by moment for its existence on that unimaginable ground and fount of all being. Secondly, this God from whom all good things come, wills to fill us with himself. He gives us a life of our own, which is our life, but he does so in order that we might open ourselves to him so that he may fill us with more and more of his life of love and light.

If this is what God is like and wants, the question arises as to how he can share his life with us? The Christian claim is that he has chosen to do this in terms we can understand, in human terms. It is against this background that the call of Jesus to follow him has to be understood. He is not a human despot. In his humility and powerlessness he incarnates the unconditional claim and gift of God-the claim of God the God from whom all things come and the gift of God who wants to grow his own life within us.

This is not only a challenge to our discipleship we experience it as a threat to our autonomy. For we like to be self-sufficient, in charge of our own life, going our own way, beholden to no one. Jesus manifests in human terms both the absolute claim of God as our God, as the one who by definition makes a total difference to the way we see and try to live life. He makes present the supreme gift of the life of God himself which he wants to shape and form us, to become part of us. This is an invitation. But it is also the claim of God as God, as our God, as my God. We find this threatening. But the testimony of those who respond to the invitation to follow Christ however, is that this is fact the way to deep fulfilment and happiness. One of the greatest of

the secretaries of the UN was Dag Hammarskjold who was killed in a plane crash in suspicious circumstances in 1961. He was at the heart of one world crisis after another. After he died a spiritual notebook was discovered.

We find him musing like any other human being . In 1952 he wrote “What I ask is absurd: that life shall have a meaning. Later, his entry for Whitsunday 1961 reads.

Once I answered Yes to Someone-or Something. And from that hour I was certain that existence is meaningful and that, therefore, my life, in self-surrender, has a goal.

He said Yes to someone or something and from that moment he knew that life was meaningful and his life of self-sacrifice had a point.

A testimony closer to home appeared in last Sunday’s reflections on lockdown by a member of our own congregation Cathy Putz. She wrote

I was also reminded of the powerful impression I had when being surgically treated for cancer two years ago that in those gifts of time, and my body, and God’s shepherding hand, I had everything that I needed. Our mission is at heart a very simple one. Follow me Christ told us. There is a great sense of relief and freedom to be able to do that and to cast aside our usual daily anxieties

The invitation to follow Christ in daily self-surrender and the discipleship of love does indeed come for most of us much of the time as a threat and a challenge. But as she said

Our mission is at heart a very simple one. Follow me Christ told us. There is a great sense of relief and freedom to be able to do that and to cast aside our usual daily anxieties.

One of the themes running through T.S.Eliot’s great poem, Four Quartets is how the past and the future all point to one reality which is always present - the timeless moment, the still point of the turning

world. In this moment everything is asked of us, and at the same time all the intimations of joy and delight find their consummation. At the end of the poem we we have the lines

Quick now, here, now, always-

A condition of complete simplicity

(costing not less than everything)

It does indeed cost not less than everything, for it is the absolute claim of God for a total unconditional loyalty. But It is at the same time something that is totally simple, an opening up, a handing over, a being available.

And it is now, here, now, always, in every moment. Here is our fulfilment, here is our delight, here is our happiness now and in whatever future beyond death God wills to give us

“Anyone who wishes to be a follower of mine must renounce self; he must take up his cross and follow me.”

What this means in the simplest terms is that it means trying to live fully in the present moment, seeking as the spiritual writers have put it, to practise the presence of God. This is to open our heart and mind to the leading of love, here, now, always.