

Sermon: Trinity College Cambridge 8<sup>th</sup> February, 2009-02-10  
Puzzling Reflections Job 23 and 1 Corinthians 13

“The trouble with you bishops is that you’re always fudging things. Why don’t you just speak out? Give us the truth of God’s word, and tell us what to do?”

It was a charge which was made two or three times in my own ministry in Lincoln, and one with which I had a great deal of sympathy. But I always wondered if it was in fact quite so simple? Think of that enigmatic statement you’ve taken as the series title for the sermons this term: “I am that I am”; what we don’t know about God? What do we make of that?

At first sight, of course, St Paul appears to have no doubts. In speaking to the elders of Ephesus, he says quite simply, “I did not shrink from declaring to you the whole counsel of God.” (Acts 20.27). But then, in his first letter to the Corinthians he appears more cautious. “Now we see through a glass darkly”, he says. Or, as a modern translation puts it: “At present we see only puzzling reflections in a mirror”. (1 Cor. 13.12)

Both these sayings are ascribed to St Paul in the New Testament, and yet they represent, if you think about it, two contrasting ways of understanding the basic character of Christian faith. According to the first, God has clearly declared His purpose. The Christian is one who has accepted that revelation in faith. His or her responsibility, like that which St Paul claims to have discharged, is to hold nothing back, but to declare that revealed counsel of God, whether, as it was said of the Old Testament prophets, people will hear or whether they will forbear. Christians know the truth, because it has been revealed to them, and they must declare it to others.

But Paul’s challenge to the church in Corinth sounds a much more tentative note. It sees Christian faith in terms of a quest, a quest for the meaning of life, a search after truth. Christians believe themselves to have glimpsed a puzzling reflection of that truth in the mirror of their Christian faith, and what they have to offer to others is rather an invitation to join them in the quest and to help them in their attempts to decipher those puzzling reflections.

Now if we set those two contrasting approaches side by side, I suspect we’re likely to look upon the former at least as robustly ~~faith~~ to scripture and the mainstream of Christian tradition, and the latter as a watered down version of it – the result, perhaps, of the erosion of historical and scientific criticism.

faithful

But the possibility of rooting that second, more questing approach, in those famous words of Paul in 1 Corinthians 13 ought to give us pause to reflect, before we type-cast those two approaches in that particular way. Think for a moment of the content of some, at least, of the more declaratory passages in scripture.

In the Book of Job, you remember, it is Job’s friends who “know” the truth, and simply affirm that suffering is due to sin, and that Job’s sufferings are evidence that whatever the outward appearance, whatever Job’s protest, he must be a specially culpable sinner. The glass into which they look remains clear; it is Job’s glass which

is dark – for he insists that the God who must be righteous, as denied him justice, and hidden himself away. “Oh, that I knew where I might find him... I would lay my case before him and fill my mouth with arguments”, he cries out in despair. But then, in the declaration which God Himself makes out of the whirlwind at the end of the book, it is Job, and not his friends, who receives the divine commendation. Nor does that declaration of God remove the darkness of Job’s glass. It certainly gives him a sense of God’s presence, but the most it gives him by way of understanding are some oblique clues to aid him in his continuing reflections: “Where were you when I laid the foundations of the earth? Has the rain a father? Who begot the drops of dew?”

More significantly, think of Jesus Himself. The two basic descriptions of his teaching, according to the Gospels, the two things that most impressed themselves on the crowds, were that he taught them with authority, and not as the scribes, and that He taught them in parables. His teaching had a declaratory quality all right – not for him the carefully hedged legal opinion of the scribe or the academic lawyer – but once again it was a declamation of a curiously oblique and enigmatic kind. “The Kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe the Gospel.” But ask what the “Kingdom of God” means and no explicit answer is forthcoming. Instead, the answer is given indirectly in parables. “The Kingdom of God is like... a mustard seed... leaven in a bowl of meal... treasure hidden in a field... a net thrown into the sea”. Those parables were not a kind of sermon illustration. They weren’t told to “perk up” Jesus’ hearers. No. Jesus spoke in parables because they were the most appropriate way of speaking about God.

The Christian gospel is something to be declared, but it is not always something to be declared “straight”, and what the parable helps us do, like the Burning Bush, is to step aside and look at life and its purposes from a new and different angle. The one thing, however, it cannot do is to replace those puzzling reflections with clear and unmistakable pictures. And when the Church tries to do this, as it often does (and as it’s under strong pressure to do today) it runs the risk of ceasing to point men and women to the true God, and, pointing instead to itself, or to the god of its own ideology. After all, what we don’t know about God is always greater than what we know.

But can a faith which acknowledges the blurred nature of its own vision still command out allegiance with that absoluteness to which religion lays claim? I would turn the question on its head and say that it’s only such a faith, one which does acknowledge the blurred nature of its own vision, which can rightly claim our full allegiance – because it’s only such a faith which is pointing us to the true mystery of God, and not enrolling us in the service of some lesser god of its own invention. As a Church of England doctrine report once put it: “As Christians we have to get used to being totally committed to a faith that can only be provisionally stated.”

But let me bring all this down to earth. When Christians come together in their most characteristic way of meeting, to renew and deepen their common faith, they meet not simply to declare and proclaim, nor simply to probe and enquire. They meet in the context of an action with bread and wine; an action which has about it a firm declaratory character: “This is my Body; this is my Blood”. But the declaration is of an oblique, puzzling and parabolic kind.

The words are not simple or straightforward in meaning. Had they been so, they would not have been the occasion of so much controversy and conflict down the ages. No. They are too profoundly true for that. Rather, they point us to things that lie behind and beyond what can be clearly stated: a union of the divine and the human; a union of our present with the past life, death and resurrection of Jesus. They speak to us of how our ordinary workaday lives can be the medium of God's presence, and of how our life with God, and our life with one another are inseparable, because only as the Body of Christ can we receive the Body of Christ. Such words remain riddling words, and the vision to which they give rise remains a puzzling reflection in a mirror.

But a reflection is a reflection of something, of something other than itself, of the ultimate reality of love in which our lives are grounded. And the basic declaration is that while the puzzlement remains, while the quest goes on here, we are being grasped by that ultimate reality, the God whom we know in and through our Lord Jesus Christ.