Sermon for 1st in Ordinary Time Year C

1st after Epiphany

Readings: Acts 8:14-17; Luke 3:14-17, 21-22.

i

Powerful preachers have been both blessing and bane for the Church. Some preachers have used their skills to lead people to Christ – but others have proclaimed chiefly themselves.

Powerful preachers have filled churches over the years that have promptly emptied as soon as they have left. Others have used their gift to found a new sect – and the worst of these have ended in flame and death, such as Waco or Jamestown.

Fortunately, Waco and Jamestown are the exceptions, rather than the norm. Many powerful preachers have retained both the knack and the humility, even in the midst of public adulation, to step aside and bring people to worship not at their own feet, but at the feet of Jesus.

Sometimes great preachers have only gained respectability after their death; at the time they were unconventional mavericks, frowned upon in their day. Was the preacher founding a personality cult, or doing the work of God? Sometimes, only time will show. Wesley would have been one such controversial figure.

ii

John the Baptist was a great preacher. Crowds just flocked to him, willing to travel far off into wilderness regions in order to hear him. Some joined his group as an inner circle of disciples. Others remained loyal to him in far-away towns for years after his death until visited by the Apostles.

The authorities in Jerusalem found him just an irritant, a trouble-maker, but a dangerous one. His popularity made him dangerous and even in their later confrontations with Jesus, the chief priests dare not disparage the ministry of John, for fear the crowds would stone them (Luke 20.6).

John, however, did not allow his popularity to get in the way of his mission. He knew that he was a messenger, a harbinger of the One who was to come.

When Jesus appeared, John stepped aside. According to Matthew, John tried to resist baptizing Jesus and asked if he could be the one baptised (Matthew 3:14). According to John the Evangelist, the Baptist cries out: “Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world” (John 1:29).

Had the Baptist stayed on at that time and refused to recognise the Messiah, he would have become a barrier across the road to salvation, rather than a signpost.

John did make one final check that Jesus had acknowledged his Messianic status before his defiant attack on Herod Antipas and Herodias was to cost him his head (Luke 7:18ff), but he had already stepped aside by then.

Many people, especially common people and tax collectors had submitted to John’s baptism, yet John willingly hands over his followers, including his inner circle of disciples such as Peter, Andrew, James and John, fishermen from Galilee (John 1:37ff). The Church has much to learn from John the Baptist.

iii

The Church too is called to be a signpost, a pilgrim people who do not acquire the world for themselves, but seek to lead people to Christ himself.

In Acts 8:14-17, the Apostles Peter and John face a tremendous temptation to get in the way of Christ, to become themselves, barriers in the way of salvation, rather than God’s chosen harbinger’s of the kingdom.

It had come to their notice that the Samaritans had voiced their support for the Gospel message. We all know of the animosity between Jew and Samaritan. Yet here were these Samaritans wanting to join the Church. Presumably they had not been evangelised by the Apostles themselves up to this point. So how would the Jewish leaders react to the Samaritans muscling in on their patch?

Peter and John had a momentous choice before them. The Samaritans had been baptised – they uncontestably belonged therefore to the faithful – and yet they had not received the Holy Spirit. What a temptation for these Jewish Apostles to keep the Samaritans as second-class Christians! Yet they knew the power of the Holy Spirit was not theirs to play with to satisfy their own love of power, but they were simply the chosen conduits through whom Christ was giving the Holy Spirit to those who believed.

Peter and John stepped aside from over 400 years of antagonism and mistrust and blessed them with the Holy Spirit.

As in the Baptism of Christ account, the point of the exercise is participation in the Holy Spirit – the voice from heaven declaring Christ’s sonship and the alighting of the Holy Spirit upon Christ to endue him with power for his ministry.

Conformity to outward ecclesiastical practice is not the main point; the main point is participation in the life of the Spirit. This is shown again in Luke’s account of Peter at the home of Cornelius the Centurion in Acts 10:44, when baptism **follows** the manifestation of the Holy Spirit upon the Gentile household. Here in Acts 8, baptism **precedes** the Holy Spirit.

Wesley also defined the Church not by ecclesiastical rite, not even counting baptism into his beloved Church of England as sufficient, but for Wesley what counted were signs of the New Birth.

Wesley espoused a very ecumenical spirit for his age. He was less worried about outward conformity to ecclesiastical rule and custom and more concerned about whether people exhibited signs of a grace-filled life.

Unusually for his time, this definition of true Church, allowed Wesley to accept the authenticity of other Christians from the Catholic tradition on the one hand, to the Moravians on the other. Anyone trying to live a life of scriptural holiness was a fellow traveller to Wesley, even if they belonged to a Church that according to his view, held erroneous doctrines. Wesley would have included both the Catholics and Moravians in that category, but for him life in the Holy Spirit was the crucial factor.

Wesley was no hypocrite either. He used the same measure for his own Methodist societies.

He reluctantly submitted to “become more vile” and adopt open-air preaching because the practice was obviously blessed by the Holy Spirit. He formed his Methodist societies even in the face of opposition from his Anglican colleagues and superiors because his work was affirmed by the results and the apparent endorsement of the Holy Spirit.

Wesley saw his raising of the Methodist societies as an extraordinary work of the Holy Spirit that cut across the norms of Church procedures – therefore he felt he had to obey the Holy Spirit rather than ecclesiastical law.

Yet he would use the same criteria for expelling Methodists from his societies if they had lost their initial zeal and no longer manifested a Spirit-led life. What a temptation it must have been to boost his own name and keep in as many as possible to swell the ranks of his Methodists, but no, Wesley remained true to his principles: Signs of the Holy Spirit counted above all else – what he called, the life of holiness.

Wesley was passionate about doctrine, the Scriptures, Church tradition, the sacraments and all aspects of regular theological concern, but priority went to following the Holy Spirit’s lead. Where the Spirit was clearly at work, even beyond the reach of the established Church, Wesley was prepared to follow – just as Peter at Cornelius’ house, or standing before the Samaritan believers.

We may take comfort in belonging to what we believe to be the true Church, or in believing what we believe to be the true faith, but what really counts is whether our hearts are right with God. We can debate theology, scriptural interpretations, ethical standards of behaviour, validity of church ministries and so forth – and important as those things are – the vital point is this – is your heart right with God?

For many Methodists around the world, today will be Covenant Sunday, when we renew our covenantal promises to follow Christ. Those promises are hollow words unless they touch not only our lips, but come from our heart.

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