Sermon for 21st in Ordinary Year C

Readings: Jeremiah 1:4-10; Hebrews 12:18-29; Luke 13:10-17.

i

“Take me to the Pope,” he said. “I must see him straight away.” The request came from a young giant of a man from Florida who turned up at my door in Rome one day under the misapprehension that because I was the Methodist representative to the Holy See, that would give me immediate access. After explaining I was rather lower in the pecking order than he had assumed, he told me why he had such an urgent need of a meeting. “I’m a born saint,” he said, “God has declared me a saint and I want to see the Pope to tell him.” After trying a few of my colleagues around the city who also didn’t have immediate access to the papal living quarters, I think he reluctantly went home.

That guy intimidated some women in our congregation for a few weeks simply by his domineering, physical presence, but in fact he was a gentle giant. The only guy who ever frightened me was one who came by one week aggressively telling everyone how sinful we were and how righteous he was, but there was a menacing edge to his ranting. “I’ve never even read about anyone as holy as me,” he said to the former archbishop who was hosting us all for lunch.

It makes me think that some of the OT prophets might not have been easy to live with – but they don’t betray that deluded self-righteousness of the true fanatic. Jeremiah for instance tries to off-load his divine call by telling God he is too young; Isaiah said he was unworthy because he was a man of unclean lips, both Moses and St Paul claimed to be poor speakers.

Diffidence, incredulity, fear, a sense of unworthiness – these are the signs of an authentic call. We need to be very cautious about encouraging those who are absolutely certain of their unique ability to speak on God’s behalf.

Yet such impediments are not sufficient to resist God’s call: for God promises to Jeremiah to strengthen him by being constantly at his side and by putting the words into his mouth (Jer 1:8-9).

The call to speak on behalf of God is a fearful responsibility that only a fool would rush into. Jeremiah is told that it will be difficult, that it will include times for pulling down, uprooting, overthrowing and destroying before any planting and building.

Religious fanatics like the destroying and the uprooting part of the assignment especially, but a sane person fears that most. We all wish to be popular and it is with great trepidation any preacher or representative of the Church starts making enemies. Who wants to be thought a fanatic or a fool? But following God’s call means it is not always possible to remain friends with everyone. It is a cost that weighs very heavy on the heart of every sane individual.

ii

Jesus also knew the cost of speaking out.

He is moved by compassion when he sees the woman bent double, unable to stand erect. Despite it being the Sabbath, Jesus restores her – not just physically – but also to her rightful place in the community as she too is a “daughter of Abraham” (v16).

We cannot be sure, but in a society that regarded physical illness and misfortune as a sign of one’s inner spiritual health and relationship with God, it could be that the community ostracised this woman on the assumption that she was crippled through some sin on her part. She may have had the right to be a “daughter of Abraham”, but it is possible the community did not treat her as such, and perhaps resented her presence in their synagogue, believing she was spiritually unsuitable to associate with them.

By healing her, Jesus restores her physically, but in the eyes of the community, he restores her spiritually too, and thereby restores her socially also to resume her rightful place within her family and district. A little later, Luke will tell us of Zacchaeus the diminutive tax collector, who by different means, is also restored to his rightful place as a “son of Abraham” (Luke 19:9).

However, the one who assumes the role of defining who is in God’s favour and who is out of favour, the synagogue leader, he takes offence against Jesus for this Sabbath-day cure. He cares more about the outward conformity to the Law than he does that this poor woman has been restored.

The gate-keeper into God’s fold, the synagogue leader, is actually on the outside himself. He is condemned by Jesus as a hypocrite. The ordinary people were delighted; in their simplicity they could see the obvious fact that what Jesus had done was a wonderful and beautiful act. The synagogue leader and those like him were blind to what Jesus was doing – and ironically it was their use of the holy Law of God that had blinded them.

The opponents are said to have been “humiliated” (v17). This is not what Jesus would have wished, but is the inevitable consequence of human freedom. To speak the truth does call for the courage to stand one’s ground and resist those that wish to impose an alternative version of the truth. Confrontation is unfortunately always part of religion, even that of “gentle Jesus meek and mild”.

Christ does not impose his version of truth on others by force. The Christian way is to turn the other cheek and if necessary go to the cross. But to stand firm on what Christ has revealed as the truth remains our sacred duty, despite the cost.

iii

The *Letter to the Hebrews* urges those who are tempted to renounce their Christian faith in the face of hostility from their fellow Jews to stand firm.

The *Letter* does not urge them to use force against opponents, it does not call for a military crusade or Jihad, but it does urge believers to witness even in a hostile situation.

The writer compares the shocking power of earthly holiness to the awesome power of heavenly holiness. It was decreed that should even an animal innocently wander upon God’s holy mountain whilst Moses was receiving the Ten Commandments, that animal should die (Heb 12:20 and Ex 19:12-13). A person trespassing upon the mountain would also pay the ultimate price.

The Christian author of the *Letter* does not suggest that being a Christian is a walk in the park compared to the terrifying strictures of the OT, but says that if people had to pay attention to Moses or pay the ultimate cost for their disobedience, how much more attention should we now be paying to the heavenly warning we receive from the risen, exalted Son?

Yet we should not thereby be filled with even more terror than the people had experienced in the days of Moses.

Christians can find the encouragement to remain loyal to Christ even in the face of hostility because of the cosmic context of our Christian mission. For Christians perform their loyal acts of faith before a heavenly Zion, a heavenly Jerusalem, and before the “joyful assembly” of the angelic host (Heb 12:22), and before the sympathetic “spirits of righteous men made perfect” (v23) and before the forgiving grace of “the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel” (v24).

Christians should not be motivated by fear – but should be inspired to give loyal service despite the hostility of the world because they know the ultimate victory has already been secured, their salvation has been promised by the saving blood of Christ, and they are cheered on by the saints above and are aided by the angelic host.

This passage reminds me of a story about the Celtic holy man, The Venerable Bede.

This great man is renowned as one of the Church’s great historians; he was a famous scholar and man of prayer during his own lifetime, but the younger generation were not so easily impressed. To the young monks of the priory, the wise and holy old man was just **old**.

One day they decided to play a trick on him. Two young monks persuaded the almost blind old man to come quickly to the priory chapel where a huge crowd of pilgrims had turned up to hear him preach. In fact, the church was empty – and they intended having a good laugh at his expense as he preached his heart out to an empty church.

According to the old story, the two young monks soon stopped their chuckling when the empty church was filled by angels.

We may not perceive the angels ourselves, but we live in the same spiritual context as the Venerable Bede.

The *Letter to the Hebrews* urges all believers to keep the faith, to take courage against those who oppose us, because we witness before a heavenly Jerusalem to which we already belong, and in which one day we shall reside.

Such a faith, such a confidence, must never turn into the arrogance of the fanatic; we should all remain in awe and trembling before God – as Jeremiah and the prophets of old bear testimony.

Nor should we allow our assurance of salvation to turn into the self-righteousness of the leader of the synagogue who presumes his own unimpeachable credentials and assumes the right to bar others from coming into the kingdom. It is a double tragedy when we use the Bible to tell people they do not belong, rather than using the Bible to tell people that they may freely enter the kingdom.

Yet equally, to hide behind our duty of humility so as to deny our faith before the world because our faith is out of fashion would be an abdication of our Christian responsibility. Who then would be bent double, bound tightly by the world’s disbelief?

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**July 2015**