

Sunday 3rd February 2019

Epiphany 4

No prophet is accepted in the prophet's home town.

Jesus spoke from personal experience. Despite the caphuphal surrounding his birth, angels, shepherds and wise men, his upbringing was almost totally obscure. He lived in a small town with Mary and Joseph and trained as a carpenter to follow in Joseph's' trade, like most young men would. But at the age of thirty it becomes clear to him that he has a different vocation - a sense which is confirmed when he is baptized by John and greeted by a voice from heaven. At the beginning of his ministry he returns to Nazareth and announces to the astonished Jews that the prophecy of Isaiah is now fulfilled in Jesus of Nazareth.

The response is one of sheer disbelief:

This is Joseph's son, surely!

And of course they are right as far as they know. Jesus did indeed grow up as Joseph's son - and if fatherhood is about nurture and care he is Joseph's son. But they have missed the point. This man is God's anointed one. He is the messiah. He is God the son. And describing Jesus as Joseph's son is rather like describing the greatest English novelist as an atheist adulteress. It is rather missing the point. No prophet is ever honoured in his own country.

But I remember as a child once speculating on how I would do in comparison with previous generations. If Jesus of Nazareth were to walk down Bulkington Lane, would I recognize him ? Had he already done so and I had missed him ?

As I grew older I thought about the matter with a lesser sense of urgency. It all seemed rather theoretical. I figured that the chances of Jesus walking down Bulkington Lane in my lifetime were pretty slim.

But as I grow older still I am beginning to recognize the question as being the most important there is. The question of whether we would

recognize Jesus if we were to meet him. Except that is the wrong way of putting it. The question is whether we recognize Jesus when we do meet him.

It is easy to suppose that meeting Jesus, or God or however you like to think of him, that meeting him is a matter of strange mystical, supernatural experiences; experiences on mountain tops or in deep trances. Experiences denied to most of us most of the time and given to a small elite of specially religious people.

Let me quote from one of the classic writers of Christian spirituality, Brother Lawrence, a French monk who lived at the time of Charles II:

It is not needful always to be in church to be with God. We can make a chapel of our heart to which we can from time to time withdraw to have gentle, humble, loving communion with him. Everyone is able to have these familiar conversations with God, some more some less - he knows our capabilities. So, let us make a start.

Ah, you might say, that is very well for a monk. But in fact Brother Lawrence was no recluse, spending hours in prayer. He worked in the kitchen - work he did not especially like. He had a busy life and his shopping trips were hard work because he was lame.

But this, rather ordinary commie chef became a spiritual counsellor to many people. And note his advice

It is not needful always to be in church to be with God.

Now you might think that it is my job to give the exact opposite advice. Now I do think that churches offer a place of quiet and stillness where one might find God. That is why this church is left unlocked in the day. But I do not for a moment think that it is essential to be in a church building in order to pray.

I also believe that in order to be fully a Christian I, and you, need to meet with other Christians, to share in the mass and worship together. But I do not for a moment think that praying is limited to that part of Sunday morning when we gather together.

On the contrary, prayer should be a thread through our lives Sunday through to Saturday. Anywhere and any place. If we cannot find God and meet him in the ordinary events Monday to Friday, then the hour we spend in church on a Sunday morning is a strange parody of the Christian faith. It makes no sense at all. We will be as blind and as foolish as the people of Nazareth who could see in Jesus no more than the son of a local carpenter. I am thoroughly with Brother Lawrence in that respect.

His other piece of advice is this:

Everyone is able to have these familiar conversations with God

Well, in a sense, Br Lawrence should have known. He was no intellectual; he was an ordinary member of a community who spent his time preparing vegetables, cooking and shopping. He had familiar conversations with God and he expected every other Christians to do the same. In other words the Christian experience is a thoroughly democratic one, open to everyone.

When Paul wrote to the Christian in Corinth, he reminded them that they were all very ordinary:

Consider your own call, brothers and sisters: not many of you were wise by human standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth.

Maybe not very flattering. But Paul's intention was not to flatter. His intention was to assure very ordinary men and women that the power of God was at work in them. And if I am an ordinary man, which I think I am, and if you are ordinary men and women, which I think you are, then this should be of great encouragement to us. God is at work in us.

But in a later letter he goes further and asserts that it is his own experience it is when he is at the end of his tether, that God can work most powerfully in him:

To keep me from becoming conceited because of these surpassingly great revelations, there was given me a thorn in my

flesh, a messenger of Satan, to torment me. Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me. But he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me. That is why, for Christ's sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong.

2 Corinthians 12: 7-10

Perhaps it is true for me: that when I feel least effective, most helpful, most foolish and lost, that it is then that God is able to make his power most known through me

But, perhaps the passage that brings it all together is 1 Corinthians 13, one of the most powerful passages in the whole, of the New Testament and one of the best known. It is hymn to love. Perhaps we could paraphrase the passage in this way: wherever you find love, there you will find God.

Wherever we look, it is so easy to miss the presence of God. We can take for granted an act of kindness, a generous word, a cheerful smile. We can see only the difficulties, the darkness, the loneliness and not notice that God is walking with us. The great struggle we have is not to find God where he has hidden himself, but to see him in all the people and circumstances surrounding us.

Strangely enough it was summed up by a quotation on a calendar I saw once in a dentist's surgery:

True faith sees an oasis when it looks at a desert,