

Sunday 17 August 2008: Thirteenth Sunday after Trinity

Changing a light bulb

Readings: Romans 11: 1-2a, 29-32; Matthew 15: 21-28

'I ask, then, has God rejected his people? By no means!'

Austin Farrer told this story in a sermon to the Cowley Fathers in Oxford.

'There is something absurd, or almost indecent, in the task I have been given this morning. We are here before God's altar, pledging our souls to him. We are considering what his holy will lays upon us, to make our self-oblation an actuality. We are to receive, at his appointment, the body and blood of his incarnate Son under a mystery of bread and wine. We are to give thanks to him for infinite and inexpressible acts of mercy in our creation and in our redemption. And now, in the midst of this, we are to pause and ask ourselves how we can be sure of God at all. What is our predicament like? I will tell you what it is like.

Yesterday I had to replace a lamp at a height of fourteen feet in the clear middle of the ceiling and my stepladder wouldn't reach. For the first time I found a practical use for the bound volumes of the University Gazette bequeathed me by my predecessors in office (Austin Farrer was Warden of Keble) and, balancing a pile of them on top of the steps I reared myself gingerly up. I had just unscrewed the globe when I asked myself whether I was securely placed. No sooner the question asked than I trembled at the knees and came near to losing my balance by thinking of it. Pull yourself together, I said, get on with the job, that way safety lies - and so I did, and so I remain in one piece to come and address you this morning.

I hardly need to draw the moral of the comparison. It is not in looking at our faith that we have conviction of God but in looking at God and in obeying him. God can convince us of God, nothing else and no-one else can. Attend to the eucharist, make a good communion, pray for the grace you need and you will know that you are not dealing with the empty air'.

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In the letter to the Romans, Paul has been painting a rather unpleasant picture of Israel's disbelief actually suiting God's plan, but then he begins to hint at a ray of hope. And here he explains that Israel's disbelief is only partial and temporary and that, in God's plan, there is mercy for all people. If Israel has been unfaithful and it is the Gentiles who are now accepting the Gospel then surely God is repudiating those whom were once his chosen people? By no means, says Paul, most emphatically.

Caught up in the flow of his argument Paul asked the obvious question. The implication was either that God's patience would only last so long or that he had rejected Israel in favour of the Gentiles. But he poses that possibility only to reject it. He is aware of being one of the covenant people himself but I don't think this is about Paul's ego - rather, it's about having confidence in God.

God knew the character of his people before he chose them and he also knew of their frequent unfaithfulness including, now, their rejection of the Gospel. And that is surely why that rejection makes no difference to God's commitment to them. If their unfaithfulness would have made any difference to his faithfulness he would not have chosen them in the first place.

God didn't abandon the promises he made to the Fathers. They weren't nullified by Israel's unbelief and God is still faithful to us. Perhaps through centuries of Protestant work ethic we tend to put so much emphasis on our part in faith that we sometimes forget that what matters most is that God is faithful to us.

At the beginning of the Letter to the Romans Paul makes a statement of theme 'For in it the righteousness of God is revealed through faith for faith; as it is written "The one who is righteous will live by faith."'

And then he builds on that note of God's faithfulness which then sounds out loud and clear in the majestic chord of the final verse of today's reading 'For God has imprisoned all in disobedience so that he may be merciful to all'. God's faithfulness sustained through the transposition from the minor key of disobedience to the major key of divine mercy to all people. But we can't receive that mercy while we rely on anything else, whether that's our own knowledge or status or while we may think we're being obedient but actually we're not.

And it's then that the faithfulness of God draws out the faith in us. The Canaanite woman, though a Gentile, had the faith to speak to Jesus as the Messiah. We see here the very human Jesus – Jesus the man and Jesus the Jew, inhabiting the enclosed circle of his race and tradition.

Jesus was a Jew belonging to a nation that was fashioned in a painful struggle in history – and continues to be. He lived in a society where women, generally speaking, were seen as possessions and inferior to men and such societies still exist today. There was a horrifying piece in the press this week about the Congo with the headline 'If a woman says no, we use force' quoting a member of the army of that country. Jesus lived in a society where Gentiles were unclean and now here he is, being confronted by someone who is both a woman and a Gentile and an astonishing conversation ensues. Here is an appeal from a non Israelite for healing on behalf of her daughter. But although the passage has the features of a healing story – an unclean spirit, Jesus' healing power and, ultimately, proof of healing, the real focus is on the dialogue.

But at first there is none for Jesus didn't answer her. At best this may seem to us to be strange behaviour and, at worst, downright rude, until we remember the context. The disciples are in there too – it seems it's not only the woman who is wanting healing – they're eager for it too – to get rid of this plague of a woman! Jesus reminds them that he is sent only to Israel, the implication being that healing was an integral part of his ministry and so healing bears that limitation also. But the subsequent exchange between Jesus and the woman goes to the very core of what Jesus' mission was about.

Religious and racial requirements appeared to mean that Jesus couldn't help. The woman wasn't a Jew, he was sent only to Jews. In those lines about the food and the children and the dogs common wisdom provides a critique of religious requirements. Jesus challenged others to meet responsibilities laid upon them by God and not to evade them. Now, at the prompting of this woman of faith – humble, polite and determined, Jesus acts in that way himself – her faith cleverly expressed in a piece of common household wisdom.

In her gentle reply 'Yes Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table' she triggers a creative moment of understanding when vistas open and barriers dissolve. We're here because of the truth uncovered in this story for in it the spirit expressed in Jesus reaches across all boundaries.

We see the astonishing sight of Jesus, a male Jew, receiving a lesson as it were, from a Gentile woman. Someone who stepped out of her background and made her own personal journey of understanding. God is faithful – it is on that that our own faith can be based – but it's not just a faithfulness expressed in the reliability of the sun rising and setting 'on the evil and on the good' or of the rain falling 'on the just and the unjust'. That doesn't express the whole truth of his faithfulness for it doesn't speak of the personal God, concerned with the individual and our particular needs. Total impartiality would be total impersonality which isn't to say that a personal God has favourites but that he treats particular people in particular ways.

Not, I would suggest, in ways that can seem to make God's faithfulness to us so plastic that it can be moulded into any shape as illustrated by the story of Mr Taylor's rheumatism 'which was a judgement, until his daughter swore to you on the Bible that the talk of his secret drinking was a baseless slander. Her

father was a saint. His rheumatism was, therefore, a trial. But then the Bowling Club went on a days outing and drove their mini-bus into the sea and Mr Taylor's rheumatism, since it had kept him at home, proved a blessing in disguise and a sure example of God's providence and faithfulness!

We are called, not to worry so much about our own lack of faith, but to wonder at God's faithfulness to us, concerned, both for the whole and for each one of us as individual people. If we can remember that then we're able to acknowledge our true place in God's creation – depending on God for life and being held and sustained by Him.