



Third Sunday before Lent
Sunday 5 February 2012

Getting up and Serving

A sermon by Revd Katherine Hedderly

Readings: 1 Corinthians 9. 16-23; Mark 1. 29-39

I shared the Eucharist on Thursday this week at a celebration of Candlemas with the sisters of the All Saints community in Oxford. It was incredibly cold in their chapel, we wore our coats and scarves and one or two from their nursing home were swathed in blankets to keep warm. But it was also beautiful. This service, which marks the end of Epiphany and turns us towards Lent and Easter, ended with a candlelit procession around the chapel, each person carrying their own light and we shared the final responses together:

‘...we turn from the crib to the cross, let us shine with the light of his love, we go to carry his light, let us shine with the light of his love.’

Each one there, one or two with walking frames, (one over 100 I found out), blew their candle out, a symbol of the recognition that what they carried was the light of Christ actually in their lives, and in their actions, and in their hearts.

I wondered how each of them was going to share that light of the gospel in their own way that day, and how they might have done that during their lives. Just being in that service with the challenges of older age and the cold, seemed to be a good expression of faithful love and service. There was an awareness of weakness and vulnerability around me but also strength, especially in the community of sisters and staff, in their loving care and service.

What it means to live out the light of the gospel in our own way and having that light at the centre of our lives is brought to life in our readings today.

Paul, as he writes to the Corinthians, speaks about the Gospel as ‘a way of life’, a necessity – like breathing, a privilege and commitment, a passion – something he simply ‘must’ do. Something that is so much in his blood and at the centre of his life, that even the things he is due, such as receiving a living, he forgoes because it is a point of contention for the Corinthian community, and he doesn’t want anything to stand in the way.

When he talks of standing alongside both Jew and Gentile – those who observe the law and those outside the law - of forgoing strength and privilege and honour to be alongside those who are weak, or vulnerable, he is not talking of some kind of trick to win people over, like a colourful chameleon, changing his allegiance to suit. Rather, he is expressing his desire to experience life alongside people,

see what they see, speak to them in their own language, make himself available for them and their needs. The desire to bring others the light of the gospel and the love and compassion of Christ ranks way above cultural differences or social privilege.

Becoming all things to all people is about being fully available to all kinds of people, in all walks of life, in all situations, and allowing God to use you as you freely give your life in serving others. Isn't it easier and more comfortable to decide on the sector or type of people we find it easiest to come alongside, and leave the rest to others? Decide for ourselves what our gifts are, who we find it easy to communicate with and leave it at that. What Paul is suggesting is far more challenging. It takes how we are best used in the service of the gospel out of our hands and puts it in God's hands, whether we are nine or ninety nine or 100. It's not an easy option because it confronts our priorities and our prejudices.

For Paul, issues arising in the Corinthian community are dealt with in the light of the gospel. Each time he brings its light and freedom to bear on the moral issues they are facing at their own context – whether that is about the rights or wrongs of eating food used in the worship of idols, or receiving a wage for what he and others are doing, he finds his way through, even if that means not doing what he has every right to do. Each situation is weighed up and considered and given a response, as best lives out the truth.

For the church today, that might translate as the moral issue of standing up and speaking out for those who are most vulnerable in our society at a time of economic recession and cuts in care and services, as bishops have done recently in the House of Lords; or as our BBC R4 Sunday Worship broadcast this morning emphasised, as we celebrate 60 years of the Queen's accession to the throne, being a church that celebrates and reflects our diverse communities in this country, as a way to build and sustain our national life together, and reflect the breadth of the kingdom of God, where all can find a home. Or perhaps this coming week at General Synod, engaging with the process of opening up the role of bishop to women as well as men. And engaging with our hearts and minds on what a truly inclusive church could be like; like Nick Holtam, our former vicar speaking out in the press this week and just this morning. If we really put our faith at the centre of our lives, it shapes and moulds our actions and thinking. And it is a responsibility and privilege that we all share.

Living out our faith, is not something to be tacked on to our lives, which we can chose when to engage with and when not, like a good cause we might chose to support when we have a bit of spare money or time. It is the inspiration at our centre that we live from. That always tips us into actions that are more loving, more freeing, more open and honouring of others.

We see Jesus living out the gospel by his actions and words. In the intimacy of a home, amongst his disciples he takes time to come and heal Simon's mother-in-law; in public with crowds pressing around him he unbinds people and brings them new life, in silence and solitude he draws close to God, and then with conviction and sense of purpose he presses on to other towns in his desire and need to speak of God's kingdom, rather than staying put. Drawing alongside others, taking time, being available, abandoning himself to God and to those around him, being called to new places, completely caught up being 'love in action', being 'light' - in his encounters, in his acts of healing, in prayer, in obedience to God.

We may not know how we proclaim the gospel. Sometimes it will be in the intimacy of a home, amongst family and close friends, sometimes it will be in saying no to expectations and prescribed ways of doing things and setting out into new experiences. Sometimes in faithful times of solitary prayer. It will always be in the loving service alongside others, as we each in our own way get up and serve him. Expressing the light we know in our own hearts in the best way we know how.

I suppose we usually want something a bit more dramatic than ‘getting up and serving’ - the response of Simon’s mother-in-law, but that description gets to the point. It was certainly the simple humble expression of loving service I witnessed this week. Isn’t that at the heart of all our faithfulness and at the heart of Jesus’ ministry too, getting up and serving just where we are, with those we find around us, hoping to witness to the light and truth in the situations that confront us.

Later in Mark’s Gospel we will hear that ‘the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.’¹ From the crib to the cross Jesus poured out his life, as light and love.

‘We go to carry his light, let us shine with the light of his love.’

...getting up and serving...it’s just like breathing, we have to do it, it is the gospel, and it’s our life.

Mk. 12.45