

Sunday 15 June 2008 Sunday: The Fourth Sunday after Trinity

The kingdom of heaven is near

Readings: Romans 5.1-8, Matthew 9.35-10.8

Jesus sent the twelve out with the following instructions....As you go, proclaim the good news, “The kingdom of heaven has come near”... It’s extraordinarily doctrine light. No requirement to assent to some creedal formularies. No motion to General Synod requiring the conversion of Muslims or anyone else. Just, “The Kingdom of heaven has come near”. He told them to cure every disease and sickness... in other words to make people more human, fully alive. The Kingdom of God is life in all its fullness.

The disciples travelled light, taking no gold, or silver or copper in their belts, no bag for the journey, or two tunics, or a staff. Doctrine light, and possessions light.

About 80 people set off from the church steps on the Friday morning of the late May Bank Holiday for this year’s Pilgrimage to Canterbury. The company grew over the weekend so that about 140 of us gathered in Canterbury early on the Monday evening for the service in the cathedral’s crypt chapel and sheltered from the rain in the cloisters by the tomb of Dick Sheppard.

There weren’t many homeless people on the pilgrimage this year but perhaps it’s because the homeless part of St Martin’s organises the pilgrimage which helps to open us up to each other. Most years, as this, I just walk the last 10 or 12 miles into Canterbury and try to get the feel for what has been going on for the pilgrims along the way. I am often struck by conversations with people who are travelling light and who have bonded and opened up on the journey. As Ali G might say, these are people keeping it real and it is an extraordinary privilege to hear their stories.

- A young woman who came to London from overseas to study, fell in love, stayed and has established a civil partnership. Now rising air fares are beginning to impact on her ability to go home regularly. Her relationship isn’t recognised in her own country so she and her partner could not live there because her partner could not get a work permit.
- A nurse working at a sexual health clinic for youngsters aged 16-20. Their lives are often chaotic and sexual relationships can be casual but the youngsters can be straightforwardly direct and honest and delightfully engaging.
- A person recovering from a messy divorce who had just been made redundant so was also facing uncertainty about work and money.
- A student full of Christian faith and hope for their step this summer into a first job in which they will have what sounded to me extraordinary responsibility for monitoring and shaping public policy at a local level.
- A regular pilgrim developing creative alternatives through work and community politics and who has fallen in love and wanted to tell me all about it.

Few of these pilgrims fit with regular church, though some do. But they were all 'real', well focussed, committed to living life well and to doing their best even when things had fallen apart for them. With straightforward reality these people were living with great dignity and courage. The kingdom of heaven was very near.

By contrast, from the outside church communities often look 'unreal', as though people are putting on a front. We're seen as superior, self-righteous people who appear to be good but who perhaps aren't as good as we'd like to think we are. Most of us who are regular church-goers will have been told at some stage that we are hypocrites. It doesn't take newly ordained clergy long to realise the only answer is to admit I am, and that the ground of faith is not my own goodness but God's love.

From the inside, of course, it feels very different. As with the pilgrims, my experience is that most church goers want to be deeply honest about themselves before God. So in the prayer of preparation for this service we pray,

Almighty God to whom all hearts are open, all desires known, and from whom no secrets are hidden....

I don't think I have ever prepared a group of people for Confirmation without someone in the group worrying towards the end of the process that they aren't good enough to be confirmed. But the point is not that we can demonstrate how good we are and how much we love God but that we accept how much God loves us. As St Paul said in today's passage from the letter to the Romans, we are justified not by our own good works but by faith in God. Most Sundays after receiving Communion we pray,

Father of all, we give you thanks and praise that when we were still far off you met us in your son and brought us home...

What's going on in this church setting is that God meets us, accepts us we are and renews us.

Are there any limits? None. It was a thief on a cross who said, "Jesus remember me when you come into your kingdom"; a cheating tax collector who was called into the company of the disciples, the disciple who denied he even knew Jesus who became the rock on which Christ built the Church. The only limit is our willingness to accept God's love for us. Judas was so full of despair that what he had done in betraying Jesus was irredeemable that he hanged himself, and maybe even that was not the last word. There's a belief that between Good Friday and Easter Day Christ went down into the depths of Hell, the harrowing of Hell, to rescue even those who were furthest off. But it does depend on our willingness to respond to God's love.

It doesn't help us as a church to think that some of us are better than others. There are no limits to God's love and we might be more self-knowing in recognising the hard won experience that lies behind the truth that in God's kingdom it is the person who has been forgiven much who knows how to love much. Knowing the love of God makes us restless, unsettles us as we begin to glimpse the change necessary for God's kingdom to come on earth as it is in heaven.

As part of the buildings renewal project our three education and meeting rooms have been named after internationally known people connected with St Martin's who have created change in the direction of the kingdom of God - Peter Benenson, the founder of Amnesty International, Li Tim Oi, the first Anglican woman priest, and Archbishop Desmond Tutu, the former Archbishop of Cape Town. On Monday we welcomed Archbishop Tutu to see his new room. It's not very big. The others are even smaller. But we hope they will be rooms in which people can be real, dream and find the courage to try

to live in response to God's love. As Cardinal Newman said, "Here below to live is to change and to be perfect is to have changed often".

Archbishop Tutu blessed three statues which have come to us from Zimbabwe. Made of jacaranda wood in a workshop associated with a Christian mission, they are wonderfully still and prayerful: Mary protectively cradling the infant Christ; Joseph the carpenter holding hammer and saw (I hope encouraging our builders to finish), and an angel reading a book. It is lovely to have such a gift from Zimbabwe at a time when so much is going wrong there. They will help us to pray for the world as it is and to know that there are other possibilities within the love of God.

We said together the prayer Archbishop Tutu wrote during the years of Apartheid knowing that things would change.

Goodness is stronger than evil;
Love is stronger than hate;
Light is stronger than darkness;
Life is stronger than death;
Victory is ours through Him who loves us.

That's the good news which is celebrated in every time and every place in this and every Christian community. Imperfectly we bear witness to it; in this eucharist Christ is known; and we re-commit ourselves to live as people who have glimpsed that the kingdom of God is near.

And, just as a foot note because there's nowhere else I can say it before you receive Communion this morning, it is lovely today that we do so using the two chalices and patens given to St Martin's by Elizabeth Pocock in 1746, which were sold in 1973 and now are back for us to use regularly again. I've no idea about how this fits with our being 'possessions light' but they are special, set apart for use week by week to engage us with Christ in this place. The Kingdom of God is very near. Amen.