

Sunday 15 March at 6.30pm

Fulfilling the promise

Readings: John 14. 1-21; The Call – George Herbert

One day, when the St Martins' congregation was 'on tour' during the restoration and renewal of the building, the passage from John Ch.14 that we have just heard suddenly connected me to my past, and at the same time opened up my future. It was one of the weekly education sessions which we used to have in the Crypt at St Mary-le-Bow after the 10am Eucharist. Somehow those sessions came to life – we were in unfamiliar surroundings, any groupings that might have existed had been mixed up, there were no routine patterns or fixed expectations. It felt as though we were all in this together, discovering how to be ourselves in new surroundings, a little bit vulnerable, learning what it meant to be St Martin's without St Martin's. On this occasion when we read John Ch.14 we were learning the technique of 'lectio divina', whereby you savour the words of scripture and try to allow space to attend to what God might be saying to you through this reading. A word, a phrase might stay with you and take on some meaning within your context. It felt like a bit of a risk – and if I shared something..... would it be inappropriate, frowned on, doctrinally dodgy?

When we went around the group and people were invited to share what they had experienced I was struck that every single person was able to contribute, and that each was held by a different phrase [about 20 of us were present]. So I did what I'd never done before and just said exactly what came to me, with a sense that I needed to engage with what was happening if I wanted to live to the full. For once, I'd stopped being scared of opening myself to pain and ridicule, and God's love had a chance to work on me more fully. F.W. Faber puts it beautifully in his hymn 'There's a wideness in God's mercy' – verse 4 starts:

But we make his love too narrow
By false limits of our own (NEH461)

The phrase that stuck in my mind in this first 'lectio divina' session was from the passage where Christ tells his disciples that if they love him, they must keep his commandments, and he will send the Holy Spirit to be their guide. The phrase was: 'you will know him because he abides with you, and he will be in you'. I was taken back to another place – St Michael and All Angels, Witton Gilbert, a village church just outside Durham, the cathedral city where I grew up – and to the singing of Charles Wesley's hymn 'O thou who camest from above, the fire celestial to impart'. That hymn is based on a verse from the Hebrew scriptures – Leviticus Ch. 6, verse 13 – where God tells Moses that when the fire is lit, Aaron and his sons are to keep it alight. 'A perpetual light shall be kept on the altar; it shall not go out'. It is significant that as the story goes on it is God who lights this fire initially. Wesley uses that image most beautifully in a way that links both to Christ's coming among us and lighting the fire of love in people's hearts, and to Acts Ch. 2 and the gift of the Holy Spirit. Not that I was thinking of that back then, aged 17 – all I knew was that God was with me in that place, around me, in me – and this was how I wanted to live my life. And that life was one I wanted to live as part of a community of faith – the first time I realised I really needed to share in worship with other people.

As we sat in the Crypt in St Mary-le-Bow I don't think I found words for all that, but I managed to explain the link to that little village church and quote the first verse of 'O thou who camest' – and was a bit surprised to hear myself saying something about doing God's work. I didn't really know what that could mean, and yet I felt it so I said it.

I seemed in some sense to be ‘finding my voice’ and this episode was one of several over the period of a couple of years which held great significance for me in this respect. It all started as I entered the final, intensive phase of a Masters in Business Administration and became aware that in handling the physical and mental demands of my work and study I wasn’t allowing enough space simply to attend to God – or indeed to other people. When I started to create that space, some of the most extraordinary things happened – each tentative step that I took felt supported and blessed and brought a kind of healing, and I began to understand what it is to see Christ in others in a way I simply hadn’t before. Christ’s command to ‘love one another as I have loved you’, which comes both before and after the passage we have just read from John, felt deeply personal and real.

There have been many points in life when I have wished I’d understood things – or understood more fully – sooner, but I also have a sense that we need to free ourselves up to live fully in the present, unburdened by ‘if onlys’. The ‘if onlys’ set false limits on our potential to fulfil God’s promise. That I think is where repentance, turning to Christ, and forgiveness come in. Only then can we offer our whole lives to God in the present and focus on that hope set before us. ‘I am the way, and the truth and the life’ – that way, that truth, that life transform everything and give ultimate meaning.

It was a friend who first taught me an important lesson over 20 years ago. She suddenly said firmly ‘I wouldn’t want to turn the clock back’. I was initially bewildered. She had recently recovered from a terrible accident. Her back was broken, her ankle smashed, and half her face had to be completely rebuilt. She looked different from the woman I’d known briefly a couple of years before. But she wouldn’t want to go back to avoid the pain, not to mention the huge changes the accident had brought to her life, because she had become a different person as a result. She had new insights which she might never have had – to lose those was something she couldn’t bear to contemplate. It was a while before I understood what she meant, but when I did it affected my life profoundly. I too had had a brush with death in my mid-20s and I’d initially have given a lot to go back. Aged 25, when I’d just qualified and was looking for my first professional post, years of misdiagnosis and pain came to a head and I was suddenly taken very ill. The misdiagnosis and poor treatment didn’t stop there, and I owe it to the love of an incredible GP and God’s grace that I’m still here today - that the longing I had to be out-of-doors and able to stand up straight and walk amongst the trees I could see was ultimately realised. I found myself struggling slowly back to health and with no ovarian tissue. If I were ever to have a baby I’d be dependent on another woman’s eggs (which was pioneering stuff in 1983) - and what about relationships? Even friends might think I wasn’t a proper woman, and marriage seemed out of the question. But when I really thought about my friend’s words I knew she was right, for herself and also for me. I’ve changed as a person because of the effect of God’s redeeming love in that situation and in each experience of the pain of loss, each shattered dream. That love has opened me up to new potential, and brought me insights and friendships I could never wish to be without.

That knowledge dispelled more than the one ‘if only’. I could see my whole life in a different perspective and there was a sense and shape to the parts that mattered which could only have one response: a renewed commitment to live the gospel message in the present, if only I knew how.

At around the time of the conversation with my friend, I found my way to St Martin’s. St Martin’s wasn’t in the tradition I was used to, wasn’t at all what I thought I was looking for – and singing the anthem in a choir of 6 or 8 on the ‘then’ chancel step was frankly terrifying. But I stayed and began to appreciate other people’s traditions and what they could bring to worship. There was something about the place. All of life was here and all of life was

offered up to God. It didn't matter if we made mistakes – as a community we seemed to grow by trying and risking things not being perfect.

My sense of family began to change completely – and not just because I met my wonderful husband, James, here. My family now extends across the world, through those I've met in and through this place. It was with the choir that I first visited South Africa and was taken into Alexandra township. As you looked down from the top of the hill, it looked like a rubbish tip, and then you realised that these were the corrugated iron roofs of shacks, weighted down. No-one we met had been unscathed by HIV in their family, they had lost many to AIDS. Yet we sang Psalm 23 – 'the Lord's my shepherd' - to one another in all the versions we knew, then one of the women took me by the hand and we were led around the township. They had suffered so much and yet there was so much love, such faith.

Through the International Committee here, working with partner organisations, I have been privileged to take part in several Days of Spiritual Healing with refugees and asylum seekers. One of the refugees I talked to had been raped in the violence in her home country. You could see the pain in her eyes, and yet she engaged positively with the discussion and creative liturgy. The second time we met she told me that she'd had a test and now knew she was HIV-positive as a result of the rape – but she had postponed starting the drugs so that she would be well enough to attend the Day of Healing. She said these Days brought her hope, and we, the group, were her family. The next time we met, I could see that the hope she'd never lost was burning brightly in her eyes – she talked about the pain, but also of her dreams for the future. The scars were healing, and she was an inspiration.

As I've sought to work out what it means to live the gospel, a major influence has been the Melanesian Brotherhood. I can still remember the moment when, sitting in the choir stalls here, I first heard the news of the seven Brothers who were held hostage and killed as the Melanesian Brotherhood sought to bring reconciliation during the civil war in Solomon Islands in 2003. I was shocked, upset – but I didn't yet understand the effect that those Brothers would have on my life. I subsequently read their story – in Richard Carter's book *In Search of the Lost* – and was struck by God's redeeming love working through this tragedy. I felt connected to people who came alive through the pages of the book. These Brothers at the other side of the world are my brothers. They seemed to gently pose the question – 'What are you doing in your circumstances to bring about the kingdom of heaven on earth?'. I've since met some of the Brothers and loved both the joyful exuberance of their worship and their ability just to be there with us in peaceful silence. There's a directness and simplicity in their faith and attitude to mission, they know what it is to speak and pray from the heart. That's something my husband, James has taught me too as we've grown in faith through our marriage, and it was a natural step for us to commit ourselves to support the Melanesian Brotherhood and to a rule of life as Companion Members.

So what am I doing to bring about the kingdom of heaven on earth? Certainly I have found the courage to believe my contribution in the 'here and now' counts, and my sense of an ever-widening family gives me a passion and an energy I once lacked. Time attending in silence, time letting scripture sink in, is hugely important as I seek to understand God's purpose for me and to work and speak and act in response to that call.

Ready for all thy perfect will
My acts of faith and love repeat [NEH431]

Wesley's hymn still holds the pattern for the way I want to live my life in fulfilment of God's promise.