

SERMON preached on Easter 3 (Third Sunday of Easter) 10 April 2016
Hugh Valentine / Readings: Acts 9.1-2-; John 21.1-19

AN INSTRUMENT WHOM I HAVE CHOSEN

When Jesus came to Golgotha they hanged him on a tree,
They drove great nails through hands and feet, and made a Calvary.
They crowned him with a crown of thorns, red were his wounds and deep,
For those were crude and cruel days, and human flesh was cheap.

When Jesus came to Birmingham they simply passed him by,
They never hurt a hair of him, they only let him die.
For men had grown more tender and they would not give him pain,
They only just passed down the street, and left him in the rain. ¹

I was once in Birmingham. And it rained. I did not see Jesus. But then, I was not looking for him. That of course is part of the point being made by Studdert Kennedy in this verse from his poem *Indifference*.

I had been there at the university attending a course on government. One session was on ethical standards in public office. The lecturer cited a number of ethical schools; he mentioned Plato and Socrates and the Buddhists. In an hour he made no mention of Judaism or Christianity as possible ethical frameworks. I raised this during question time. I was surprised, I said, because this was Birmingham, where the Quakers had been a major influence. They were renowned for their probity and honesty in business dealings. They had been highly active on Birmingham's City Council - a presence that amongst other consequences resulted at one time in few pubs and restrictive licensing hours.

I did not mention *Jesus*. Instead I spoke of 'New Testament ethics'. Looking back, I think I did not want to look like some sappy Christian peddling the 'Jesus Saves' line, and running the risk of the sharp response '*not on my wages he doesn't*'.

Would Studdert Kennedy have handled it differently? Who knows? I think there is a case for speaking of the massive imprint this man Jesus Christ has left on human history in a way that is sensitive to the situation. Some call that contextual

evangelism; others call it playing safe. The cock crows daily for many of us.

Contrast this with the story of Saul's encounter with Christ and that of the disciples by the Sea of Tiberias (in today's readings). Powerful, un-contestable, self-authenticating, unequivocal. One characterised by a dazzling flash of light that left Saul blind, the other by the quiet and quietly authoritative presence of the Risen Christ on the shore.

I don't know about you, but I *long* for that kind of encounter. I often pray that if it be God's good will, I might experience it.

Longing for such an encounter, and claims that you have had one, runs risks. It has been said that "if you talk to God, you are praying; if God talks to you, you have schizophrenia". ²

And no doubt national characteristics come into play here: the English have tended to be cautious about enthusiasms in religion.

But God is not an Englishman - or woman. And however we read the scriptures we'd be doing them harm if we failed to see that the God described there is at times passionate, intense, challenging and overwhelming. It could be that many of us on the day when we face God shall feel far more ashamed of our hesitations than our excesses, of our conformity than of our standing out and standing up.

¹ G A Studdert Kennedy, *Rhymes of a Padre (1921)* 'Indifference'

² *The Second Sin (1973)* Schizophrenia, Thomas Szasz

Stories such as the ones we are given today - of Saul (aka Paul) on the way to Damascus, and of the disciples meeting the post-crucifixion, now risen Christ, are likely to seem powerfully attractive to many of us (unless, that is, we do love our lives and this present age more than anything else).

They will seem also frustratingly inaccessible. The ordinary experience of faith for most of us suggests that we shall not meet Jesus in that way, shall not be electrified by a direct encounter with God which will joyously rob us of self-control and composure *and turn us into new men and women.*

That could be for at least two reasons. The first is that we do not expect to encounter Christ in Birmingham. Or Penge. Or Piccadilly. The other is that in the present dispensation, the present age, this current phase of time, God may be operating in a different way.

For what it's worth, my hunch is that we remain for the most part blind and inattentive (otherwise preoccupied), and so we miss so very much of God's *continuing* revelation, continuing activity, continuing purposeful penetration of our world and our lives and our experiences. This is the blindness that comes from Studdert Kennedy's *indifference.*

God has not stopped. She has not gone away. He has not grown bored and left town. Our problem is the perennial human problem and challenge: how to escape the confines of our small worlds, how to share, listen, play, forgive, affirm, laugh, embrace and understand. In short, *how to see.* (By the way, if you were to say anything in summary about John's Gospel it is that it is about *seeing.*)

I want to suggest a number of ways in which those of us who long for such a shocking and life changing encounter with God might best prepare ourselves. We might still miss Jesus in Birmingham (or wherever). That is always a risk. But these are ways in which we can soften up our hearts and sharpen up our perceptions. Some of them may seem unremarkable. Some find resonance in other traditions. We are used to using the word 'sacramental' mainly in relation to Holy Communion and Baptism. But we can rightly describe as sacramental all those things which in some way carry the possibility of opening up God to us and ourselves to God. So, perhaps consider then these as sacraments:

The first is to open ourselves to contradiction and paradox. Post-Enlightenment western minds tend to think in linear ways. Seeking truth when it comes to matters of faith and practice is far more like herding frogs than dealing with logic. The Holy Spirit makes use of contradiction and of paradox. *So, try herding frogs - for Christ's sake.*

The second might be humour. Much of what passes for humour may be closer to cynicism, but real humour releases tensions, binds relationships and seems to enable the best in us to shine. A certain evangelical cliché has it that 'the family that prays together stays together'. I rather believe that communities and groups and families that know and share humour are likely to grow together. And of course, rather than denying the value of prayer, that simply broadens its definition, for prayer is all those actions and activities which remind of us our inter-connectedness and which heighten our sense of reverence and respect. Real humour does that. *So, let us welcome humour - for Christ's sake.*

The third concerns the place of tears. Could we regard these as another sacrament? This is perhaps a more delicate matter than humour. The Desert Tradition in Christianity emphasises the power of tears as agents of resurrection and transformation. Sometimes our tears are muffled, we fight them back or cannot manage to allow them to burst out, and so the healing and cathartic possibility of breaking into tears is suffocated.

But when we find ourselves wracked by tears, so that all so-called decorum is lost and artifice or disguise is impossible and we and our tears are one – one expressive, real, authentic human life – then isn't that sacramental? Tears become the outward and visible form of an inward and invisible grace. *So, in due season, welcome your tears - for Christ's sake.*

The fourth is silence. This is, for those who know, more (so much more) than the absence of noise. In a beautifully practical book called *A City Not Forsaken* can be found the *Rule* of the Jerusalem Community – a religious community established in Paris in the 1970s.

Just as Benedict wrote his *Rule* in the 6th century, so the prior of the Jerusalem Community wrote his, but with the context of the modern, noisy city in mind. His community did not stay enclosed but

engaged with the city, and so the Rule needed to address how the brothers and sisters would respond to that engagement.

On silence, it says: *At work, in the street, coming and going, alone or by public transport, in the midst of the bustling city, bear about you the secret of your inner silence.*

Making friends with the practice of this kind of silence prepares us to hear - how could it not? *Let us foster an inner silence - for Christ's sake.*

Finally, in looking at other things that can be as a sacrament – as something which invites us in to presence and practices of God – what about friendship? Human relations offer many opportunities for muddledness, awkwardness, misunderstanding; we know that. But it remains possible, don't you think, that at heart the issue is simple, and is simply this: that our friendships may be vehicles of God's action. They may and can be sacraments. *Let us be absurdly generous in our friendships - for Christ's sake.*

As we witness the baptism this morning of Abigail and Tallulah, perhaps we can prayerfully ask for them the blessing of these 'irregular' sacraments.

In today's story from *Acts* is what to my ears is a magical, delicious phrase. You will remember that Ananias is told by the Lord to go and find the blinded, dazzled Saul. Ananias has heard about this man, and knows he has form. He is not keen on this assignment. The Lord says "Go, for he is an instrument I have chosen". *An instrument I have chosen.* Wow! What a phrase.

So, you may have not met Jesus, the Risen Christ, in the way that Saul and the disciples did (though please don't rule out the future possibility). What you do have to help you is the assurance that *you too* are an instrument that God has chosen (that's what the Incarnation *is all about*); and you have these other means by which we may (and do) come to better know our shockingly generous God: the ways of contradiction and paradox, humour, tears, silence, and one another. Pray God that we use them well, and to Her glory and purpose. Amen.

Hugh Valentine