

Hard Words

27 6 10

O God, the protector of all who trust in you,
without whom nothing is strong, nothing is holy;
increase and multiply upon us your mercy:
that with you as our ruler and guide
we may so pass through things temporal
that we lose not our hold on things eternal.

My text today may be found in our gospel portion for today from St Luke:

‘Let the dead bury their own dead but as for you go and proclaim the kingdom of God.’ (9 v60)

I don't know about you but I would not have liked to have been Tony Haywood, the managing Director of BP, having to endure questions from the Congress Commerce and Energy panel into the current oil spill disaster in the gulf of Louisiana which was happening while he was in charge of the company. Hard words from hard people with a hard view of British incompetence.

Hard words can be challenging, demotivational. A dear colleague of mine, Sue Kelly, was outstanding at getting the best from her pupils by her warm and cheerful manner, always encouraging, always finding something good to say, always helping someone to improve and to realise their potential. This is the St Barnabas school of motivation where a teacher is the ‘son of encouragement’.

Who could ask for more? Well there is more: the St John the Baptist school of verbal beating-up where you call a spade a spade: for example, 'You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruit worthy of repentance. Do not presume to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our ancestor' for I tell you, God is able to from these stones to raise up children for Abraham.' (Matthew 3 v7 - 9) This morning, Jesus says four hard things to 'would-be' disciples and we can feel them squirm as we too feel uncomfortable at what we hear.

They are on the road to Jerusalem going through the Samaritan lands. James and John, nicknamed by Jesus Boanerges, the Sons of rage, want to call down thunder and lightning on a Samaritan village which is openly hostile to Jesus. No surprise here: Samaritans and Jews hated each other as only people who are closely related can sometimes do but James and John are scandalised because they know Jesus is the Son of God and these guys have been rude to God so they deserve the consequences of such lack of respect, such blasphemy. Luke doesn't tell us what Jesus actually said perhaps something like, 'No. Don't go there. Don't think it'. The word used is 'rebuke' which suggests a pretty strong telling off for suggesting such a thing. Poor James and John have still to take on board the second half of Jesus' summary of the law - to love your neighbour as yourself. Hard to do when your neighbours are so unneighbourly, so rude, so inhospitable.

They are on the road to Jerusalem when an enthusiastic chap says he's ready to follow Jesus wherever he goes. And Jesus replies laconically, 'Foxes have holes, and birds have nests but the Son of Man has no where to lay his head.' Hard

words about the hard fact that Jesus is a stranger in the land: no where is his home because his true home is elsewhere. To follow Jesus is to be dislocated from this world, homeless in effect. This world is not truly our home however comfortable we've made our place in France – as Christians we belong elsewhere. Our journey's end is beyond this life.

They are on the road to Jerusalem when Jesus says to an unnamed, undescribed, a. n. other, 'Follow me.' He could be talking to anyone; he could be talking to us. And a. n. other replies, 'Lord first let me go and bury my father.' All very reasonable and it is surely what any right-minded person would and should do. So how can we make sense of Jesus' words which are my text today? 'Let the dead bury their own dead; but as for you go and proclaim the kingdom of God.' To help us understand what might be being said, I turn to William Barclay in whose commentary on Luke I find this possible explanation of the man's desire to bury his father first – Barclay suggests that the person's father is not yet dead; he's not even dying but alive and well. The words are just a polite way of putting something off to a tomorrow that is possibly so far off it won't ever happen. Jesus has no time for such prevarication and points to what is truly necessary to be a disciple – to proclaim the Kingdom of God now, not at some future time more convenient to us.

They are on the road to Jerusalem when a youngman who wants to follow Jesus wants to say goodbye to his family first. To him, Jesus says: "No one who puts a hand to the plough and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God." I have never tried to plough nor perhaps you but the principle is clear: if you want to plough a

straight furrow you need to look straight ahead; if you want to drive safely, then don't look around you at the countryside but look at the road ahead. His good intention in saying goodbye may mark his reluctance to say goodbye. He can't go forward because his past is holding him back.

Today we have heard hard words from Jesus:

- accept the fact we need to refrain from retaliating;
- accept the fact we have no true home on earth;
- accept the fact we need to do now what needs doing now;
- accept the fact that we need to look forwards not back with our eyes firmly fixed in the present.

Hard words. How true. It's not easy to be a Christian but it is worth it.

I have spoken in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit,
Amen.

Preached at the Eucharist

All Saints, La Vendée

27th June, 2010

H: Sermon 22: Hard Words

