

Paradox

4 3 12

Almighty God,
you show to those who are in error the light of your truth,
that they may return to the way of righteousness;
grant to all who are admitted
 into the fellowship of Christ's religion,
that they may reject those things
 that are contrary to their profession,
and follow such things as are agreeable to the same.

Today's text may be found in the gospel according to St Mark, chapter 8 verse 34:
'If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel will save it.'

David Bolton was my Head Master for four years at Davenant Foundation Grammar School for Boys in Loughton in Essex and again for a further ten years at Dame Alice Owen's School in Potters Bar in Hertfordshire. Last Wednesday, he celebrated his 19th birthday ! True, he was born in 1936; true, he has lived for 76 years; but when you're born on February 29th in a Leap Year, then you only get one genuine birthday every four years!

Paradox is one of the features of religion. Paradox is one of the marks of an encounter with deity. And it is to a paradox at the heart of being a Christian that I want to turn today.

Jesus has just asked his disciples who people think he is. He then asks them who they think he is. And Simon Peter replies, 'You are the Messiah' and Jesus is well pleased with him and the Twelve, that his time with them has not been wasted. Then he tells them a hard truth – the truth of Easter: his death and the empty tomb, the Crucifixion and the Resurrection. Peter rebukes Jesus and is, in turn, rebuked by him. And now we have the hard truth of this morning's text: the paradox of losing and saving one's life: 'If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel will save it.'

The teaching is in two halves: the cost of deciding to follow Jesus; the paradox of preserving and losing life.

First, then, the cost. Really what Jesus is saying is a call to arms: 'If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.' There is a battle to be fought and it will not be easy. A decision to be part of that battle will make real demands on us as individuals. Two demands are specifically mentioned. The first is self-denial. Our selfhood is the gift of individuality; what makes us separate and distinct from anyone else. It is a what makes us unique and as such should be nurtured and cherished. But here Christ

is calling us to set aside our personal preferences and our selfish desires in order to be part of a greater whole, a vision for all humanity. It is to use who we are to help others. We are looking outwards rather than inwards, our part – to help realise the kingdom of heaven here on earth. Paradoxically, by denying ourselves, we are actually realising our full potential as human beings. The second is to take up our cross. What the cross precisely will mean for Jesus has yet to be revealed but for us who already know the story of Good Friday and the Passion, any mention of the cross is loaded with meaning that would not be apparent here to someone hearing the word before the event. Here the word ‘cross’ would simply stand for our particular individual burden, for whatever we are being called to bear. True, some of the Apostles like our St Bartholomew were called to be martyrs but it is unlikely that that will be the fate for any of us here. That said, the word cross is a powerful image of our choosing to sacrifice ourselves for the greater good.

Second the paradox: **For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel will save it.** A paradox is a seeming contradiction and the contradiction here is that losing our lives actually results in saving our lives whereas the reverse is true: we can, even if we are lucky have everything materially, still lose the plot. So how best to resolve what Jesus is telling us? If by giving we receive, then giving up on self is the winning strategy for self-realisation. What I’m trying to say is that we are most fully ourselves when we forget ourselves in serving others. And what we do now should be seen in the context of eternal life, a life after death. There’s more to this living than just this life.

So where are we? 2012 is a Leap Year and as such it is a timely reminder of the seeming contradiction that is paradox. And the paradox of Christianity is that for Christ the Light of the world to win the battle against the power of darkness then he had first to lose his life. If we want to follow him in that struggle, then are we prepared to do the same ?

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

Preached at the Eucharist

St Bartholomew's, Dinard

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H: Sermon 25: Paradox

