

SERMON AT ST MICHAEL'S CORNHILL – JANUARY 22 2012

Most clergy have but one sermon in them.

Come to think of it, there probably only *is* one sermon,

But what is it?

It concerns the Gospel.

The good news, literally.

The good news of God's love for the whole of creation

The good news of God's love for us, you, me, all of us.

To preach the good news is to assure people that this is so.

That there is a God who loves us.

To preach the good news is to proclaim God's love for sinners.

To preach the good news is to remind people that the divine love took on our human flesh and lived among us as one of us.

To preach the good news is to release people from the conviction that they have to *do* something to earn God's favour, and to assure them that God already loves them as they are.

To preach the good news is to proclaim that all that is required of us is to respond to God's overflowing love.

To preach the good news is to encourage that response through worship, and to build up a community where people can be themselves and yet be transformed by love.

To preach the good news is to assure people that however low an opinion they might have of themselves, God has a very high opinion of them.

The older I get the more convinced I become that the faith has little to do with morality, pure and simple, and everything to do with how we stand with God, and that we have nothing to proclaim apart from that, nothing to do except to live it out.

To live it out as eucharistic, thankful people, a pilgrim people with a distinctive lifestyle.

People focussed on Jesus, whose saving death destroys our death, and whose abiding presence cements the living stones of our community.

Through baptism we share Christ's death and his new life.

And through the eucharist our life together is sustained, a sign to the world of God, our creator, lover and sustainer.

Yes, the message is simple: it is one of love.

Today's Gospel reading contains two remarkable stories.

The first, as Jesus comes down from the mountain after addressing the people, concern the healing of a man with leprosy.

The short episode is rich in messages about who Jesus is.

First, the man addresses him as 'Lord', a pointer to the divinity of Jesus.

Second, when the man is healed Jesus tells him to go through the actions prescribed in the Law when leprosy is healed.

Jesus thus shows the assembled crowd that in that sense at least he is orthodox.

But the second episode, shows just how outrageous, subversive and liberating the Gospel can be.

A centurion comes to Jesus, asking for healing for his servant – clearly a special person to his owner; Luke describes the servant as 'dear to him'.

The fact that Jesus is willing to take any notice is significant, for the centurion represents the foreigner, the oppressor.

In any case he is a gentile and it would be bad from for a Jew to speak to one, let alone enter his house.

But a centurion!

Gentile soldiery had been seen as beasts, subhuman, limbs of the devil.

For Jesus inherited group hatred counts for nothing and he ignores labels.

He loves an enemy into a friend.

The centurion, like the leper, addresses Jesus as 'Lord', thus clearly recognising something that that many of those present had failed to perceive.

It was a centurion, standing with others by the cross, who declared 'Truly this was the Son of God'.

So in Matthew's Gospel, steeped in Jewish tradition, the mission to the Gentile world, to the whole world, has begun.

For a Roman centurion to come to Jesus was remarkable.

This pagan grasped what so many in Israel failed to see.

Lord, I am not worthy that thou shouldst come under my roof; but speak the word only, and my servant shall be healed.

His faith alone was enough for him to believe that a word from Jesus would cure his servant.

Jesus observes that he has not found faith such as this even in Israel.

Nothing more is required of us: the recognition that we do not, cannot earn the love of God.

It is a gift.

God in Jesus says the word and we are healed, made right with our creator.

All that follows is a response to this.

Nothing else.

We are not worthy, and we plead that here and now God will say the word.

Our faith is weak, and it takes a sacrament, a dynamic action to make a reality again what has already been achieved once and for all.

So what sort of God do you believe in?

Is it the legal God, who simply responds to correct behaviour and rewards the upright?

Paul was pretty negative about that sort of thing.

No human being can be found righteous by keeping the law.

For him it is faith in Jesus Christ that makes him right with God:

I am living in faith, faith in the Son of God who loved me and gave himself for me.....If saving justice comes through the law, Christ died needlessly.

The Son of God who loved me and gave himself for me.

Not just for Paul and the first Christians.

Not just for the centurion worried about his beloved servant.

Not just for those who've worshipped here before us

But for us.

That is at the heart of our life together.

That is the basic truth that holds us together, that forms our life.

This is what we celebrate when we meet each Sunday as a community.

The Son of God who loved us and gave himself for us.

Who loves us and still gives himself.

We are so weak and unsure of ourselves that we need to be reassured.

So as Christ came to us in the first century, he still comes.

Speak the word only and my soul shall be healed.

So there is only one sermon.

There is only one reason for our being as a community: that overflowing love of God, a fountain in whose lifegiving waters we constantly bathe.

To return to that is to invite the Church to live again.

To live again when it can seem so dull, so discouraging, so negative, so dead.

There is hope for the Church here and everywhere for that reason.

If only we will realise that God has already said the word.

And it is a word of love.