Sermons for the Christian Year

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SERMONS FOR THE CHRISTIAN YEAR

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1st September 2002

COPING WITH GOD, COPING WITH CHRIST

By the Revd Peter G. Jarvis
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Jeremiah 15:15–21; Matthew 16:21–28; Romans 12:9–21

Jeremiah had a problem coping with God. The prophet had many enemies, and he wondered why God didn't deal peremptorily with them, stop them in their tracks, and take vengeance upon them. Here he was, an innocent man, God's faithful servant, but God wasn't sticking up for him, protecting him, or meeting his deepest needs. He claimed that he had 'listened to every word' God had spoken to him, and told God, 'Your words filled my heart with joy and happiness.' He had taken his prophetic vocation seriously, and couldn't imagine why things had gone so badly wrong. He therefore peppered God with indignant questions: 'Why do I keep on suffering? Why are my wounds incurable? Why won't they heal? Do you intend to disappoint me like a stream that goes dry in the summer?' (GNB) – in other words, just when I'm most in need of a drink! He was beginning to suspect that after all his years of faithful service, God was letting him down, leaving him in the lurch.

All this may seem surprising. It is clear that Jeremiah wasn't just a passive mouthpiece, a speaking tube through which God's message was conveyed. He was a thoughtful and introspective person, and couldn't make out what God was playing at. This man of God, this servant of God, began to wonder whether God could be trusted, could be relied upon. In a religious person, and Jeremiah was deeply religious, this was a radical and disturbing doubt. His faith was being tested to the limits, as ours is tested from time to time. He was tempted to fall into despair and unbelief. He challenged God with the question: 'Do you intend to disappoint me like a stream that goes dry in the summer?' This was Jeremiah's cry of dereliction, paralleled by the cry of Jesus on the cross: 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?' – why have you let me down?

God gave the prophet a pretty rough answer. 'If instead of talking nonsense', said God, 'you proclaim a worthwhile message, you will be my prophet again.' God was hinting that Jeremiah had temporarily ceased to be his prophet. Our sympathies are probably with Jeremiah, who certainly had a rough time of it.

Peter had a problem coping with Christ. As Jeremiah had rebuked God, so Peter rebuked Jesus. Jesus had said openly that he would suffer much at the hands of his enemies, and be put to death. How dare he say such things! Peter was horrified to think that such a fate could possibly befall his Master, and indignantly rejected the idea. 'That must never happen to you!' he cried. In effect he was telling Jesus, 'You've got it all wrong.' Peter thought that instead of letting his enemies kill him, Jesus should stick up for himself, assert his authority, display his power. What on earth was Jesus playing at?

Peter, like Jeremiah, got a pretty rough answer. Jesus almost exploded, perhaps because this was a real and attractive temptation. 'Get away from me, Satan!' he cried. In other words, 'You're blocking my path, the path God wants me to follow; you're acting as an obstacle in my way. Your thoughts are not God's thoughts, but human ones.' Poor Peter! He was only concerned for his Master's welfare, only trying to protect him from harm; yet Jesus had called him Satan (an adversary) for his pains. Peter must have felt deeply hurt. He couldn't make out why Jesus should indulge in such grim prophecies. It was as if he had a death-wish, a desire for self-destruction. He believed that Jesus was purposely and needlessly throwing his life away, surrendering to his enemies. All this was perplexing, puzzling, to Peter, and he couldn't make any sort of sense of it. We are reminded of some words in John's Gospel, where

Jesus tells Peter: 'What I am doing, you don't understand now, but you will understand later.' And those words apply, not only to Peter, but to us. Quite often we don't understand what God is doing, what Jesus is doing.

To make matters worse, Jesus went on to say that his disciples must follow the same difficult path he was treading, must be prepared to lose their lives for his sake, must deny themselves and take up their cross. And this seemingly negative way would prove to be positive in the end, the way to eternal life. No wonder Peter was baffled. Quite often we are baffled too. Yet the cross is the central symbol of our faith, and there is no getting away from it. But how out of tune with the times all this sounds – it is the very opposite of the characteristics of the present age: individualism, egotism, selfishness, greed. Christians are called by Christ to act as an antidote to all this, to be part of a counter-culture.

Paul had a problem coping with God, coping with Christ. He had fiercely opposed the followers of Jesus, because he believed that Jesus was a heretic, accursed by God (the crucifixion seemed to prove it). Then Jesus met him on the Damascus Road, and began the process of reconciliation to God and transformation by Christ. Jesus challenged Paul's assumptions, undermined his self-righteousness, changed his mind, and redirected his life. In the passage from Romans Paul painted the portrait of a Christian, of what every Christian ought to be. The keynote of the Christian life is love (the Greek word means spiritual love, an unself-regarding love, like the creative love of God, or the sacrificial love of Jesus). This love issues in a life devoted to God's service, and includes the service of others: 'Inasmuch as you did it to one of the least of these, you did it to me.' The Christian life, according to Paul, is a life of hope and joy; a life of patient endurance in times of troubles; a life of prayer; a life of generosity to our fellow-Christians, and of hospitality to strangers. Jeremiah asked God to bring down retribution on his persecutors; but Paul, touched by the spirit of Jesus, said the opposite: 'Ask God to bless those who persecute you, to bless, not to curse.' He went on to say we should sympathize with other people, laughing with the joyful, weeping with the sorrowful; that we should show a genuine concern for everyone; and that we should take an honest view of ourselves, admitting our imperfections. Wherever possible we should be on good terms with other people, and should seek to overcome evil with good, as Jesus did.

All this may seem well beyond the scope of most of us: a tall order, a recipe for sainthood. Yet we've all known men and women who displayed this Christlike character in their daily lives, who possessed these Christlike qualities, and we thank God for them. May we follow their good examples, God being our helper. Amen.

8th September 2002

TIME TO BE TOUGH?

By the Revd Colin Sedgwick, MA, MTh
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Matthew 18:15–20

I was quite a young and inexperienced minister at the time, so perhaps I have some excuse; but there is no doubt that I handled the situation pretty badly.

Somebody spoke to me about another church member. It had come to their attention (they said) that this man and his wife were doing something that wasn't quite right – claiming benefits to which they were not entitled, perhaps. What was I going to do about it? To be honest, I can't quite remember what I did do; but in the light of Matthew 18:15–20, and the teaching attributed there to Jesus, I'm quite sure what I should have done. 'What's this got to do with me?' I should have said. 'Don't come bringing stories to me behind someone's back. You've got a problem with this person? – well, go and sort it out yourself! And if that doesn't work out, well, fine, *that's* the time to get me involved!'

What tragic damage is done by busy-bodies and interferers! Even if their motives are good, they invariably do all the wrong things – they neglect to establish the facts beyond dispute; they gossip; they drop dark hints; they create a destructive, poisonous atmosphere of rumour and suspicion. Churches end up split; and the name of Jesus is dragged in the mud.

Two key questions need to be asked if we are to avoid this kind of scenario.

First, *What was Jesus' approach?*

Broadly, he advocated a three-step procedure. Step one, as I have suggested, is that we should try to sort the problem out on a one-to-one basis. In

other words, the fewer people who are aware of the difficulty the better. Who knows? Perhaps there has been a genuine misunderstanding which can be quickly cleared up. Perhaps the person in question has indeed been at fault, but will take the rebuke kindly, even be grateful for it, and take steps to put things right. If this happens, what need is there for any other person to know what has gone on?

Only if this step fails should step two be embarked on: take a couple of other people – preferably mature, well-respected members of the congregation – and see if their words bring the offending person to a right mind. All right, he may refuse to take *you* seriously; but mightn't he be persuaded to think again in the light of such a deputation? And again, it is only if this step fails that step three should be entertained: take the issue before the congregation as a whole. Yes, it's a shame, and very disagreeable, to have to bring the thing into such a public forum, but regrettably that may now be necessary.

And if the offender remains adamant? – well, 'treat him as you would a pagan or a tax-collector'; implying, almost certainly, ostracism, the cold shoulder.

One commentator remarks that these words 'sound strange on Jesus' lips'. Wasn't Jesus the *friend* of tax-collectors and sinners! Indeed, didn't he sometimes hold them up as an example to the outwardly religious?

Yes indeed. But almost certainly Jesus is using what the experts call an *ad hominem* argument, that is, one aimed not at spelling out a truth in abstract principle or theory, but in such a way as to make an impact on those particular hearers. And among the Jews of his day there is no doubt that 'pagans and tax-gatherers' were people you steered well clear of! Anyone who actually saw Jesus in action would be in no doubt what his attitude towards such people was in practice. But they would get the point he was making here: a time may come, sadly, when a stubbornly impenitent person has to be treated as an outsider.

This leads to question two: *What was Jesus' aim in this approach?*

The answer is three-fold. First and foremost, he wanted *the restoration of the sinner* – that he should be 'won over' (v. 15). The idea of judgement, condemnation, simply does not enter in.

How vital this is! If ever we find ourselves called on to discharge such a difficult duty, God forbid that we should forget that we too are sinners, and that we are to do what we do in a spirit of humility and love. We go to plead, as brother or sister, not to judge.

Secondly, Jesus was concerned for *the unity of the church*. This is why he says the matter is best cleared up with as few people as possible in the know. Even if the talk that goes round a church is not intentionally malicious, it can leave its mark on people's minds for years to come. That can only be bad for the harmony of the church.

But thirdly, Jesus was also concerned for *the purity of the church*. This is why he insists on ostracism in the event of the offender refusing to change his ways. It is hard, yes; indeed, it may appear censorious; and it is emphatically a last resort – 'excommunication' (gulp!) is not a happy word . . . But the point must not be shirked: it is destructive of both the inner integrity and the outward reputation of the church if it is seen as condoning sin. A last resort, yes; but what is the point of a last resort if it is never actually – well, *resorted* to?

The sayings of vv. 18 and 19–20 are notoriously tricky. Whether they were spoken by Jesus in the same context as this teaching on church discipline, or were gathered up into this chapter from elsewhere by the Gospel-writer, we don't know. But, whatever difficulties of interpretation they may present, they are relevant to what Jesus has been saying. Verse 18 suggests that when the church, acting prayerfully and unitedly in such a situation, makes its decision, it is only endorsing what God himself has already decided. And vv. 19–20 similarly reinforce the idea that the church acting humbly and 'in Jesus' name' will not go astray in seeking to know and do God's will. Certainly, these famous words are of wider application too; but this interpretation fits their setting in this context.

But it is always good sense to focus attention on what is clear rather than fret about what seems obscure. If nothing else, this passage can help us to walk a tightrope of which the church throughout history has repeatedly fallen. This may be summed up in a prayer: 'Lord, I want above all else that the person who has sinned should be brought to a right mind and restored to you; for I know, Lord, that I myself am nothing but a sinner. But I also want to see a church which is united, pure and worthy of the kingdom of God. So grant to your church, acting in concert, the courage to do what is right, however

hard it may be, and to insist on that purity when confronted by flinty obstinacy. Amen.'

Toughly tender – or tenderly tough. Is that the way to put it? Something like, perhaps!

15th September 2002

AN OPEN CHURCH

The Revd Martin Camroux
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Romans 14:1–12

Someone once said 'There's no row like a Church row' and there's some truth in this. Certainly there was a row going on in the Church in Rome. The nub of it is given in 14:2 'Some believe in eating anything, while the weak eat only vegetables'. To a modern person this sounds like a row about vegetarianism. It's actually to do with Jewish purity law. In Jewish law certain meats could not be eaten and when you did eat meat it had to be Kosher. So some Christians to be on the safe side were giving up meat altogether, while others were saying 'Look, we're Christians now, these old rules don't apply anymore'. So there was a row. One group are saying, 'You're narrow-minded, living in the past'. The others come back with 'You're watering down the faith and setting yourself against clear Biblical teaching'. You can imagine the atmosphere in Church Meeting.

In this dispute there is no doubt where Paul stands. He's with the modernizers. God is now doing a new thing. But his great concern is not who is right or wrong, but how to deal with the pastoral problem of a divided church. And what he says about this can still challenge us today.

Firstly, Paul tells them that diversity of opinion is to be expected in the church. A church must respect this diversity and never suggest that only one view of faith is possible or valid. Paul writes, 'Everyone must act on his own convictions' (v. 5).

The sad truth is that we have failed to live this out and still do. Frequently churches have acted as if there was only one kind of view possible within the church – so either you think like me or you're not a Christian. So the Athanasian creed declares: 'Whoever will be saved before all things it is necessary that he hold the Catholic faith, which faith except he do keep whole and undefiled, without doubt he shall perish everlastingly'. Protestants have been just as bad as Catholics. It was Martin Luther who said, 'He who does not believe my doctrine is sure to be damned.' In Christian history how many heresy hunts there have been, how often conscience has been sacrificed.

The reality is there has never been total agreement as to what the Christian faith is. In Rome they argued about the law, in Cornish about spiritual gifts. In the Reformation about justification by faith. In the nineteenth century about evolution. Today we wrestle with human sexuality. Diversity of opinion and debate are natural to the faith. So the church must be a place where the maximum freedom of conscience is allowed.

The second point follows straight out of the first. When arguments come we must always respect each other. Says Paul, 'Those who eat meat must not look down on those who do not, and those who do not eat meat must not pass judgment on those who do' (14:3). The problem in Rome was not that there was a disagreement. This was inevitable in a living developing faith. The problem was that the two groups did not respect each other. So Paul says, 'Let us cease judging one another' (v. 13). Rather 'love one another with mutual affection, outdo one another in showing honour' (12:10).

This need is basic. At the beginning of their history the Quakers seemed radical and shocking to many. Oliver Cromwell had deep disagreements with them. But on one occasion he met with the Quaker George Fox and as they were parting Fox said, 'He caught me by the arm and with tears in his eyes said "Come again to my house: if thou and I were but an hour of a day together we should be nearer to each other". Then Cromwell added, "that he wished him no more ill than he did to his own soul."' That I think is a model for us all.

And then thirdly, Paul is not saying there is no such thing as final truth; he is saying that we do have it now. In the video 'What is the United Reformed Church?' one young man declares 'In the United Reformed Church you can believe what you like'. Paul is certainly not saying that. What we believe must be centred on Jesus and on what it means to be a disciple of his. Finally we will stand before him and there will be a judgment on what we have given our life to. But until that time none of us can have the whole truth. 'At present we see only puzzling reflections in a mirror, but one day we shall

see face to face. My knowledge now is partial, then it will be whole' (1 Cor. 13:12).

It follows that a profound humility is proper to religious faith. Sometimes people talk about God as if everything about him is clear and they alone know it. We would do well to remember the warning of Leslie Stephen when he speaks of those who define God with a precision which a modern naturalist would shrink from in describing the genesis of a black beetle.

The basic fact is this. When we speak of God the best we can look for is a glimpse of truth – never the whole of it. As Paul says, 'O the depths of the riches and wisdom of God! How unsearchable his judgments and how inscrutable his ways'! The tragedy is that sometimes we lose sight of this. Intoxicated by God we reduce him to the limits of our own understanding. Before we know it God becomes the plaything of our own prejudices. During a particularly difficult period of her life Florence had clear expectations of what God was doing. In fact she told him what he was going to do. None of it happened. Afterwards she wrote in her diary 'I must remember that God is not my private secretary'. Never claim too much with too much certainty. As Harry Emerson Fosdick said, 'The great God is, our partial ideas of him are partly true'.

Whether in Rome or now if we think that only one point of view is valid we lose something vital to the Christian community. As William Sloane Coffin says, 'We can build a community of truth out of seekers of truth, but not out of possessors of truth'. A church must be an open community where diversity is affirmed.

Let me illustrate this with a wonderful story. The greatest conservative theologian of the last century was Karl Barth. Much of Barth's theology is in dialogue with the great liberal theologian Friedrich Schleiermacher. But Barth used to tell his students jokingly that when he got to heaven he was going to have long talks with Schleiermacher. Then he will say, 'Well, Schleiermacher, you saw some great things in your theology', and Schleiermacher will reply, 'Well, Barth, you saw some great things too'. None of us, Barth used to say, can see everything.

So Paul says, 'Let us cease judging one another' (v. 13). Instead let us 'love one another with mutual affection, outdo one another in showing honour'.

22nd September 2002

CONFOUNDING GRACE

By the Revd Roger Spiller, MA
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Exodus 16:2–15; Matthew 20:1–16

We're right behind those casual farm labourers as they queue to receive their full day's wage. Their determination to be at the front of the labour market right at the beginning of the day will be rewarded. They put themselves in a strong bargaining position and their employer is a fair man who doesn't drive down wages below the market rate. They agreed 'a fair day's pay for a fair day's wage'. Though they endured the long day of harvesting against the scorching heat they take comfort from knowing that they will be fairly recompensed. They scorn the late, disadvantaged labourers, with their pathetic excuses thinly concealing their short-sightedness and indolence. Those who showed up at various intervals in the day forfeited their bargaining rights. What they receive depends entirely upon the whim of their employer. But now is the hour of reckoning when they will all be rewarded according to their labours, or so they think.

The labourers do not reckon, however, with the sheer freedom and goodness of the landowner. Those late labourers experience a generosity that they knew they had no right or reason to expect. American evangelist Tony Campolo drives up to toll stations and pays for the car behind. Members of a church in Canada go around feeding overdue parking meters. A Christian organization in this country leaves a present for each of the young Christian leaders on their residential courses, each day on their pillow, together with their favourite chocolate bar. Unconditional generosity disorientates and overwhelms. It cracks apart the iron law of effort and rewards. It intimates a new, alternative lifestyle. It leaves its recipients, like those late labourers asking 'why us?' But it left the day labourers asking 'why not us?'

The latecomers are recompensed first so that everyone knows what they receive. There's no attempt to conceal it. Those who worked the full twelve-hour shift do not resent the employer's generosity. Instead they welcome it as an indication that they too will receive proportionately more than was agreed. The recognition and rewards that come to those who precede us in different spheres of our

life can become the benchmark for our own expectations. The size of collection given to our predecessor for a certain time and effort spent in the post we now are about to vacate informs the rough calculation of what we come to expect. Effort and reward, fairness that is subject to strict calculation is writ deep into our psyche. We know the shock that is about to break open the ordered, measured, predictable world of just rewards. Occasions when our efforts have gone unacknowledged and unrewarded come to mind. The outrage we feel for the day long labourers reflects the outrage we feel from the injustices that have scarred our own lives. 'It's not fair.' Of course they receive the fair wage that they had agreed and strictly have no grounds for complaint. But grace and generosity have threatened the stratified world-view in which their moral supremacy was assured. Now the marginal, disadvantaged and contemptible receive equal recognition as themselves. Of course, where differentials are set aside, there's the recipe for bitterness and industrial unrest. But then the treatment of the labourers is not intended to be a contribution to the theory and practice of industrial relations. It is an incitement to an alternative lifestyle that anticipates the coming kingdom of God.

But even a Christian lifestyle has to have rules and rewards if morality is to be upheld. Does service, effort, loyalty count for nothing? It counts as evidence of our disposition towards God but not as the basis of a claim upon God. The iron law of effort and rewards is so pervasive that it can become the template for the way we think about all our relationships, even including our relationship with God. We make our little pacts with God in times of crisis, hoping that God will take account of the length and volume of our Christian service. But God plays according to different rules. 'Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me?' His sovereign freedom will not be trapped into our equations. His generosity will always confound our measured expectations. It comes to us when we least expect it; it takes us by surprise, but if we allow ourselves to expect it for services rendered we will be disappointed.

The church young people were invited to prepare dramatic presentations of a couple of parables for performance in church. On the appointed day, one group had got its act together and gave an effective contemporary interpretation of the parable of the labourers. The other group hadn't got their act together and were unable to offer anything. But with the parable in mind I, nevertheless, invited the group that failed us to come out and receive a chocolate bar. Then it was the turn of the successful group. But when they received the same as the first, forgetful of the point they had so effectively been making, their discontent was evident and they unwittingly offered a second, more convincing rendering of the parable.

Every instinct for self-preservation protests against the upside down world of grace, where non-achievers are blessed, first comers come last, the poor are filled and the rich are left empty-handed. To recognize grace we have to renounce the last pretensions to independence and abandon the logic that tells us that God's disposition towards us is determined by our endeavours. We are all, as a whole, without a single exception, latecomers to God's kingdom. The difference between any of us is as inconsequential as whether, when we've missed the train for a crucial meeting, we are less blameworthy because we've missed it by only ten seconds or by a whole hour. The labourers who were late to work received generosity because they were called. It was the employer, not the workers, who determined the generosity of their reception. And there is no other basis on which our relationships to God and to friends can be established. Imagine, says American preacher Leander Keck, that you are the parent of three children, aged three, five and nine. Do you love the nine year old three times as much as the three year old because he's been around to help three times as long? Of course not, because it's a family, and not a business contract.

God doesn't do things by halves. When he gives his people bread, he rains it down upon them, morning and evening, for forty years. It's like the unstoppable flood of water through the temple, the cruse of oil that's renewed as fast as it's used, the water turned into 15,000 bottles of wine, the bread that feeds 5,000 with basketfuls remaining, the seed that's scattered liberally and shoots up a hundredfold and the blood that is poured out for the life of the world. God's ways are not fair; they are generous. And to receive grace we have to trust in the fact of God's call and not in the manner of our response; to expect nothing so that we can be surprised by grace and to rejoice with those who are even now being called to his service.

29th September 2002

DO WE NEED MIRACLES?

By Mrs Susan Lampitt, BA, DipEd
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Exodus 17:1–7 (Phil. 2:1–13 and Matt. 21:23–32)

Do we need miracles? The discontinuity between the Bible, where miracles come in a constant stream and the present day in which they seem to be in short supply, strikes many people.

Of course, some people will say that there are plenty of miracles about if you only look in the right place and expect them. But today's miracles seem to be very much a matter of interpretation, there is scarcely a whole-hearted parting of the sea or a heavenly dispensing of manna to be encountered.

This dismay at God's apparent withdrawal from the activity of miracle-working was felt even in biblical times.

> Why have wicked men trodden down thy sanctuary?
> Why have our enemies trampled on thy shrine? . . .
> Why didst thou not rend the heavens and come down,
> And make the mountain shudder before thee? (Isa. 63:18)

'Where are the deeds which our fathers told us about?', the psalmist desperately demands in Psalm 44, as times are threatening yet God does not intervene.

Can God intervene? *Should* God intervene? Whole philosophy books have been written on this subject – on the intellectual problem of how God, who is timeless can intervene in a world of time, whether God who is unchanging can be swayed by prayer to intervene and change the course of events. One might add to this the scientific question of whether divine intervention would subvert the laws of nature. But although there is a great debate to be held at the intellectual philosophical level, this cannot be left as a specialist subject because there is an equally pressing set of considerations at the practical level of faith, and about the interpretation of the Bible on which our faith rests.

Take the Old Testament lesson for today. It is the well-known story of Moses striking the rock to obtain water for the Israelites. The crisis was real. The people were parched. They were in a hostile and strange environment. They were very angry. Moses was the only one with any experience of this sort of thing and so they had to turn to him. But even in this straightforward explanation of the text a point of view has intervened. I say 'with any experience of this situation' because in my mind I am already galloping ahead to what I think happened, which is not the story as told. In the story as it stands in Exodus, God performs a miracle. Moses strikes the rock and water comes gushing out. But I know that it is perfectly possible for water to be stored at the base of a permeable layer of rock lying over a layer of impermeable rock, so that if you tap into it in the right way the water gushes out. This was well known to desert dwellers and a story from the 1920s tells of Arab soldiers shouting out 'Moses, Moses' when a British sergeant accidentally caused water to stream from a rock in just this way.

So are we dealing with a physical miracle: God just chose this way to help the Israelites? Or was it a miracle of divine providence: God had ensured Moses' desert training by arranging for him to marry into Jethro's family? Or is the very idea that it needs a miracle to survive in the wilderness simply due to the urban outlook of those who wrote up the story, and so we have no miracle at all?

This is a problem that is becoming more and more urgent. What is it precisely that the Old Testament hands on to us? Clearly Jesus interpreted his life in the light of the Old Testament. Is that Testament dissolving before our very eyes?

Recent archaeology has had an impact on how we regard the Old Testament but it has really only served to emphasize what was already clearly the case: the Old Testament is a text of faith. For more than half a century Christians have taken in their stride (thanks to the struggles of those who first met the problem) the 'fact' that the Creation Stories are 'this is how it seems to us' stories rather than eye-witness descriptions revealed to the writer by God (though of course this is still the point of view of some Christians). Then there are the Patriarchs. If you read their stories with the predicament of the post-exilic situation in mind you can't help but notice how the messages in the text dovetail with the dilemmas of the struggling few exiles who had returned to live in the old Promised Land. The wealthy might have chosen to remain in Mesopotamia, but Canaan/Israel is the land of promise, not Aram. Recent interpretations of the

reign of Josiah as the source of the idealization of David and Solomon only provide more of the same. So it is not a new problem, but it is something that needs to be dealt with, as the evidence grows.

And dealt with it is in our New Testament passages.

How could the man Jesus of Nazareth be the Son of God, the pre-existent Logos? If you had met him you would have met an ordinary man, well, perhaps an extraordinary man, but a man all the same. It is the most fundamental miracle of all that those who had met and known this man – and sat by the lake and talked and had delicious suppers with him and laughed uproariously with him – could come to know him as the fundamental pivot on which the whole world turns. To them he guaranteed that there is more to the world than meets the eye, that good actually is good and not merely a matter of opinion, that when those who are foolishly committed to this point of view are tortured to death they are not the losers they seem. It is this miracle that Paul addresses in his letter to the Philippians, explaining that Jesus 'emptied' himself, and, being found in fashion as a man, humbled himself to endure the death on the cross before God exalted him. Therefore people confessed 'Jesus is Lord' and by this confession glorified God. How does it redound to the glory of God when people confess that Jesus is Lord? What did Jesus himself say?

Our Gospel reading for today precisely addresses this point. As is so often the case, Jesus is there before us. He knew the dilemma and he used it when the authorities challenged him on the question of his authority. The baptism of John, was it from heaven or of man? It is the fundamental challenge to all authorities: is there a God or isn't there? Are you in charge, or is there one in authority over you? The very existence of the faith community is the miracle – and yes, we need miracles, but they will always be a matter of interpretation and thank God for that. If I enforce my miracles on you, we end up with the Inquisition. If I offer you my insights, such as they are, and leave you free to choose, we may share a journey of discovery together.

'The Word became flesh?' Let us explore the miracle together.

Preaching with Imagination

CYRIL S. RODD, *Preaching with Imagination* (Foundery Press, 2001. £7.99. 92 pp. ISBN 1-85852-214-5).

PREACHERS who lack imagination would probably deny they do, and ignore this book; others with more humility, who know very well the weekly struggle to be arresting and stimulating, will find it helpful. Drawing on a wide experience in preaching and teaching, the former editor of *The Expository Times* offers plenty of illustrations of ways in which sermons can be faithful to the text yet vividly contemporary and challengingly thought-provoking.

'Imagination' is not an easy idea to define and it is used in a variety of ways here. Sometimes what is called imagination might in fact be simply careful exegesis, and awareness of the importance not just of text but of context. The fact that Scripture itself is contextual through and through means that it directs us from its own time and place to ours, if we are to interpret and explore it faithfully. Rodd encourages us not to wriggle out of tackling tough texts because they seem distant from today's world, or because they seem to say unpalatable things, and gives us some very helpful examples of how their very problems can be transformed into evangelical topicality. A section on blindness for instance (pp. 37–39) brings a thoughtful new approach to a range of Biblical passages. Yet there is sympathy here too for the difficulties that faithfulness to the Lectionary can at times pose for preachers, and fair criticism of what are perceived as its occasional whimsies – texts scarcely connected, sections omitted, for instance.

This is an easy read, in the style of a speaker rather than a writer, but behind the informality there is wisdom, wide reading (not just religious), and an encouraging reassurance that imaginative preaching need not be quite such a struggle after all.

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