

The Expository Times

<http://ext.sagepub.com/>

Sermons for the Christian Year

SAGE Publications

The Expository Times 2005 116: 234

DOI: 10.1177/0014524605052451

The online version of this article can be found at:
<http://ext.sagepub.com/content/116/7/234.citation>

Published by:



<http://www.sagepublications.com>

Additional services and information for *The Expository Times* can be found at:

Email Alerts: <http://ext.sagepub.com/cgi/alerts>

Subscriptions: <http://ext.sagepub.com/subscriptions>

Reprints: <http://www.sagepub.com/journalsReprints.nav>

Permissions: <http://www.sagepub.com/journalsPermissions.nav>

Copyright © 2005 SAGE Publications (London, Thousand Oaks, CA, and New Delhi)

DOI: 10.1177/0014524605052451

SERMONS FOR THE CHRISTIAN YEAR

THE TEXTS ARE TAKEN FROM THE *REVISED COMMON LECTIONARY*
(THE CANTERBURY PRESS, NORWICH, 1992. ISBN 1-85311-063-9)

1st May: Easter 6

PAUL'S CHURCH WITHOUT WALLS

*By the Revd Allan McCafferty
Kirkwall, Orkney*

Acts 17:22–31

The University of Edinburgh now has a School of Divinity which is part of the College of Humanities and Social Science. When I was a student there it was the Faculty of Divinity. Many years ago the Department of Systematic Theology was two separate departments – one was called Divinity and the other Dogmatics.

Dogmatic theology you could say is about taking building blocks from the Bible and then using them to construct a theological house which very cleverly works together coherently. Throw a question at the house about God, about sin, about grace, about salvation, about sacraments, about love, about justice and peace, indeed about anything theological at all and it will usually quickly come up with an answer. That gives a degree of certainty and can be assuring. But a drawback is that the system can be inflexible. Think of a real house – bricks and mortar, firm and solid – but if you upset the foundations, if you take a few bricks away from the bottom and decide you want to add them somewhere else, the building loses its inherent strength and can be weakened. Such a system of theological understanding works however for people who agree to share the same foundational understanding, those who are happy with the bricks and how they have been used to build the theological house.

Sometimes in general conversation people will pejoratively say of someone, 'He's a bit dogmatic', meaning he doesn't bend or move. Not bending or moving can be a good thing at times; it depends on how you look at the world.

Often when I think of Paul, I have the feeling that he would be happier with Dogmatics rather than

Divinity. Sometimes as I read his letters it seems to me he quite clearly has a firm belief about how things are, and should be and how people should act. A consequence is that his views can appear inflexible. (But maybe that says more about how he is interpreted.)

However today's reading from Acts, taken at face value, shows a different side to Paul. Here he is like someone who is much keener on Divinity than Dogmatics.

Divinity rather than starting off from a point that assumes people all share the same principles comes at theology more philosophically. It approaches things from the angle of, 'What do you believe and why?' And moves to saying, 'Here are the things we seem to share, and here is what I understand, and why I understand it that way.'

In Acts, Paul was talking to Athenian philosophers, and he approaches them aware of the background out of which their understanding of the world came.

It starts with him acknowledging the philosophical and religious backdrop they are accustomed to. And then Paul goes on to explain his understanding of God, in a way that will mean these philosophers will continue to listen and not simply ignore him. Some of them end up changing and following Jesus Christ. It is still a Christian message Paul is presenting to them, but it is presented in such a way as to allow them to be influenced by it, rather than making them say, 'That has nothing to do with my appreciation and understanding of the world and so it has little to do with me'.

Paul methodically presents his case. He starts by saying God is the creator of the universe. Then, that God transcends human life and that God has shaped history. Humanity seeks God, however God is nearer than people sometimes appreciate, for in God everyone lives, moves and exists. He notes their poets have stated 'we are also his offspring' (Acts 17:28). Paul goes on to say God commands people everywhere to repent. When he comments on the

resurrection, some scoff, some want to hear more another time, and others join him.

This way of doing theology begins by meeting people where they are, rather than starting by saying where they should be.

In 2001 what has become known as the Church Without Walls report was approved by the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland. You could sum up the major thrust of it in a few words, 'How do we faithfully listen and respond to Jesus' words, "Follow me?"'

In the following months articles in *Life & Work* picked up concerns from the report. Steve Mallon from Parish Education suggested it calls on us to 'be friends' to each other, both within and beyond congregations, 'be friends' to people wherever they find themselves in life. By being friends, we sow seeds, we create a community of care and love and valuing.

Just like Paul talking to the Athenian philosophers, valuing them for who they are and trying to understand where they come from as they make sense of the life they live.

This image of being friends with others is very much about doing, rather than talking about what to do. It is a picture of an active engaged faith and an active engaged church.

Since then congregations have been encouraged to look at and wrestle with the Church Without Walls Report, seeing where they can apply it appropriately locally.

Four years on and we are well inside a year of celebration. It's designed so that the church at local, regional and national level can share stories about what changes have come about, and tell of what new and exciting developments are happening, and most certainly to thank God for them. Three members from every congregation are invited to a National Day of Celebration taking place in the Edinburgh International Conference Centre in Edinburgh on Saturday 28th May, the day after the General Assembly closes. The day will be packed full of stimulation to help those there to learn and grow and then share their experience with their congregations. There will be specially commissioned art, and new drama. There will be workshops looking at worship, music, using sacred spaces, outreach, and much more. There will be internationally recognized speakers, and of course people from congregations with their own good news stories to tell – stories to

stimulate and encourage. There will be exhibitions. There will be a puppet show and even a Church Film Festival presenting films from many congregations. It goes without saying that there will be worship. A chance to see and share what has been happening since the Church Without Walls Report appeared, and a chance to be open to new things and new ways of being church that may help encourage existing congregations and others to respond to Jesus words, 'Follow me'.

Paul approached the Athenian philosophers by appreciating their life, and understanding what was important to them. He did not approach them too dogmatically; he was flexible, though assured.

A church without walls encourages us also to behave similarly, always to remember our faith, and to be faithful to Jesus' call, 'Follow me': but also to be flexible.

Not simply to see the need for change, and talk endlessly about it, but to step out in new ways, to set about pro-actively following him, and so allow change to happen and the Holy Spirit the opportunity to dance and enliven people and congregations in exciting and unexpected ways.

8th May: Easter 7

WAITING FOR THE POWER

*By the Revd Colin Sedgwick, MA, MTh
Kenton, Middlesex*

Acts 1:6–14

'Beam me up, Scotty!' Though never much of a *Star Trek* fan, I find it hard to read the story of Jesus' ascension without thinking of that marvellous way in which our intrepid heroes could be dissolved, as it were, in one place, only to be instantaneously re-assembled in the Starship Enterprise. (If only it worked for a package holiday in Corfu ...) Jesus, says Luke, 'was taken up from before their very eyes, and a cloud hid him from their sight' (Acts 1:9).

'Yes, but what actually *happened* to him?' we naturally ask. Did he become a kind of human space rocket, zooming off to heaven? We can be confident that this is not what Luke intends. No; he has reported earlier Jesus' belief that he is to go and be united with his Father, and the story he tells here is his account of how the return took place. Not that it is not true – Luke obviously expects us to believe that

the disciples did indeed see and experience what he describes here. But Luke's concern is much more with the spiritual significance than with the mechanics. Clouds speak often in the Bible of the presence and glory of God. And elevation from the earth speaks of authority – dead Roman emperors were regarded as deified when witnesses testified that they had seen their souls rising into the heavens. Is Luke making a political point here?

'There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio,/Than are dreamt of in your philosophy,' says the awestruck Hamlet; words which the sceptic would do well to ponder in our tragically materialistic age. The Bible consistently and unashamedly bears witness to two spheres of existence, the heavenly and the earthly. They are separate yet linked, and there are rare times in human experience where the 'join' is especially apparent. And that is what is happening in Acts 1; the join takes the form of a skyward ascent.

It may be natural for us to focus on the strangeness of the event. But that is not Luke's focus: it is the words spoken that matter most to him.

The apostles start the ball rolling with a question: 'Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?' – as if to say, 'Now that we really do know beyond a doubt that you are risen from the dead, surely the time has at last come for the hope and expectation of Israel to be realized?' A natural question; but Jesus sidesteps it: 'It is not for you to know the times and dates that the Father has set by his own authority.' He then predicts two things that Luke especially wants his readers to notice, two things that in fact form the very essence of the long book that is to follow.

First, there is *the promise of the Spirit*: '... you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you ...' (v. 8). The doctrine of the Holy Spirit as the second Person of the Trinity is still some way off in the church's future; for the apostles here, mention of the Spirit would convey chiefly the vitalizing and energizing breath of God, the very life of God dwelling in the human soul. And thus Luke's book is to be about *power* perhaps as much as anything else – power in preaching, in healing, in the raising of the dead, in brave witness in the face of persecution.

And this is why few books of the Bible are likely to have a more galvanizing effect in our churches today than Acts. How sad it is that we have tended to get so snarled up in barren and destructive controversies over the precise meaning of the 'baptism' or 'filling'

of the Spirit. We too need power! And where are we to find it – the genuine article, that is, not something artificially souped up – if not in the Holy Spirit? If that means praying for a new 'baptizing' of the Spirit, in the words of v. 5, well, why not? A book that is criminally neglected by the many, and squabbled over by the few, is the very one we most need to open and feed on. Memo to all preachers and ministers: don't neglect this dynamic (*dunamis* is, after all, the Greek word) book!

Second, there is *the prediction of a worldwide ministry*: '... and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judaea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth' (v. 8 again). The apostles are Jewish; Jesus was Jewish; the expectation of 'the kingdom' was an essentially Jewish thing. But Jesus had intimated on a number of occasions that he is for all people, and he now lays on his followers the awesome task of conveying that truth to men and women in every place, Jews and Gentiles alike. And so we are reminded that the Spirit is not given so that we can luxuriate in a warm spiritual bath, basking in our own enjoyment of God, but in order to equip us for the exciting, exhilarating, demanding – and dangerous – task of making Christ known by word and deed. To *know* Christ without also *making him known* to others is nothing short of scandalous.

Perhaps this is why the 'two men dressed in white' (v. 10) deliver, somewhat harshly we may feel, a rebuke: 'Men of Galilee ... why do you stand here looking into the sky?' (v. 11). Don't stand around! Get on with the job! As one writer sums it up, 'Their calling was to be witnesses, not stargazers.' And so, of course, is ours.

They hotfoot it back to Jerusalem (vv. 12–14). But the power of the Spirit is not given immediately, so they content themselves with gathering together to digest what they have experienced and to anticipate what is to come. The embryonic church is pictured in beautiful terms – the small group of the apostles 'along with the women, and Mary the mother of Jesus, and ... his brothers' (v. 14). How characteristic of Luke to mention the women! His Gospel began, after all, with Elizabeth and Mary, and he is determined not to let them be overlooked at the end. There is a particular poignancy in his reference to Mary. The young girl of the birth narrative has come a long way, experiencing doubts, fears and excruciating pain; her hair is now greyed, no doubt, and her back a bit bent. But she is *there*, at the heart

of her Son's new community, just as she was there at the foot of the cross.

This is the community that was to change the world for ever. It is the community to which we belong in the twenty-first century. Is there any reason why we shouldn't do as they did and, even amidst the busy-ness of church life, 'join together constantly in prayer'? Lord, baptize us again! Lord, give us another Pentecost! Who knows what God might do?

15th May: Pentecost

SPIRITED PEACE!

*By the Revd Canon Marilyn McCord Adams
Christ Church, Oxford*

Numbers 11:24-30; Acts 2:1-21; John 20:19-23

In John's Gospel, Pentecost comes early, on Easter evening, after Jesus has brushed off Mary Magdalene in the morning – '*Nolo me tangere!*' '*Touch me not!*' '*Don't keep on clinging to me!*' – the more urgently to ascend to His Father and get back by supper-time.

Jesus comes to comfort, confirm, and commission. Jesus comes to breathe the disciples full of Holy Spirit. Jesus comes to ground them in the Lord's peace.

The disciples are huddled behind closed doors for fear of the Jews. Surely once discovered, they would be presumed co-conspirators, found guilty by association. '*Did we not see you in the garden with Him? Aren't you His disciples?*' What flesh and blood authorities did to Jesus, they could oh so readily do to them. The disciples have rolled up stones, sealed the doors of their hearts, entombed their wounded souls and shattered selves, lest thieves break in and steal, vandalize and destroy. The disciples have locked themselves up, out of sight, because they do not dare to look, because they cannot afford to face the caricatured wreckage they have become.

Jesus comes to comfort, confirm, and commission. Jesus does not stand at the door and knock, waiting for them to open. Jesus comes inside and stands among them, performs His word of greeting: '*Peace be with you!*' When the troops are slain, the carnage strewn around the battlefield, when all is lost, the fighting may be over. But the silence is deadly. *Jesus comes to comfort, confirm, commission;* Jesus comes to establish resurrection peace.

The Lord's peace is not for Pollyanna's. The Lord's peace cannot coexist with lies that things are not really so bad. Animal fears respond to real threats; they are not merely neurotic. Jesus really was crucified. They really are shattered. They really could be tortured and killed. All eventually will suffer and die. Stable peace demands unflinching honesty. It takes a lot of energy, it costs a lot of worry to hide and hide from real dangers. Jesus gets inside their hearts' locked doors, *confirms*. 'The worst can and does happen!' *He shows them His hands and His side.*

Candour relieves by ending cover-up. But Jesus comes to *comfort* the disciples. What makes the disciples glad is not confirmation that the worst really happened to Jesus, but that this Jesus to whom the worst has really happened is really alive and really present with them, that the worst did not end their connection with Him. Jesus standing among them, wounded and resurrected, is an outward and visible sign that Love is stronger than death, that *the worst the powers of darkness can muster is no match for Our God*. Jesus standing among them is *the temple, destroyed and raised in three days*, just as He said.

But Jesus, standing among them, crucified, resurrected, ascended, knows that one-time, sometime miraculous encounters of signs on the outside will not be enough to secure the peace He comes to bestow. No! Stability requires Love-stronger-than-death to abide with them on the inside, behind the locked doors of their hearts, where the dead, dismembered, fear-stiffened fragments of themselves are hidden. Eternal Life, Fidelity Itself, the Loving Kindness of God must become their constant, witting or unwitting experience, the very air they breathe, the environment in which they live and move and have their being. The disciples must become, learn to recognize themselves as temples, yes, *temples that will be bulldozed and destroyed, but just as surely, after the proverbial three days, be raised up again.*

So *Jesus confirms them, breathes us full of Holy Spirit*. Live-in Holy Spirit becomes our strength, our constant *comfort*. Hovering, moving over our depths, groaning with sighs too deep for words, Holy Spirit re-creates us, re-forms us, makes integrity possible for us. Live-in Holy Spirit is Perfect Love casting out fear, little by little convincing us that – come hell or high water, and we *know* they do come – our situation is not really desperate, because, once again,

the worst the powers of darkness can muster is no match for Our God!

With the Lord's peace comes a *commission*. The Lord's peace, Holy Spirit established in our hearts, converts us into new people, turns us into disciples, collaborators, friends of God. Luke—Acts features Spirit-infested apostles preaching boldly, braving prison and shipwreck, treading on snakes and scorpions, healing the lame, raising the dead. In John's Gospel, Jesus does not commission us to preaching missions or signs and wonders, but to ministries of forgiveness and reconciliation: *'if you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained'*.

The Lord's peace, Live-in Love, indwelling Holy Spirit, willy nilly binding us altogether, warps us into a brave new world, where everything is tilted, inside out, upside down and backwards. As our dizziness clears, we find our vision sharpened and sharpening, our hearts widening and softening, our sense of security settling in and intensifying. And this grounding in the Lord's peace is what put the disciples, is what places us in a position to exercise the function of binding and loosing, that historically coveted and contested so-called 'power of the keys'.

Surely, *the Lord's peace is the gift that makes forgiveness possible*. For the Lord's peace convinces us that we are safe, that we are loved, and *therefore* that we can afford to disarm. Unforgiveness is a defensive weapon. Unforgiveness holds a grudge, keeps insult and injury fresh and lively before us, lest we be naïve, neurotically condone, forget how bad it was, expose ourselves to harm, open ourselves to the consequences of their doing it again. Unforgiveness is a weapon in time of scarcity: if *they* are undeserving, then we can claim a larger piece of the pie. Unforgiveness gives us leverage over others: if we constantly throw past mistakes up to them, we can sometimes guilt-trip them into doing what we want. But looking out from the new Jerusalem, we are in a position to recognize how even our worst enemies are frightened, confused, and clumsy, how human atrocities act out inward insecurities and past wounds, how the real cure for what ails everybody is not an eye-for-an-eye or hell-fire-and-brimstone, but Live-in Love and the Lord's peace.

The Lord's peace is not for Pollyanna's. The longer we live into it, the more deeply we enter into the heart of God, the more intolerant we become of

the brutalities of human life. The Lord's peace shines bright light on how rampant and how pointless envy, jealousy, greed, and treachery really are. The longer we live into the Lord's peace, the fiercer will be our protest against family violence, child and spousal abuse, civic corruption, social inequalities, and political oppression. The more convinced we are that we are safe, the more certain that God loves us, the bolder we become to expose the lie that some have to pretend to be smaller than they are so that others can keep up the appearance of being bigger than they are. By the authority of Christ we bind these lies on earth, roll up our sleeves to work against them, in the confidence that they will not govern the Kingdom of Heaven!

Jesus comes and stands among us. *Jesus comes to comfort, confirm, and commission*. Jesus breathes us full of Holy Spirit. Isn't it so? Jesus comes and stands among *us*. Jesus grounds *us* in the Lord's peace.

22nd May: Trinity Sunday

THREE-IN-ONE

*By the Revd Dr Stewart Weaver
Joppa, Edinburgh*

Psalm 8; Matthew 28:16–20

This Sunday is Trinity Sunday. It is the one Sunday during the year when we concentrate on one of the most important and distinct doctrines that defines our faith. Like grace, for example, it is one of the ideas, the concepts, that makes us who we are. And so, as is right for Trinity Sunday, my comments and reflections will be divided up into the three sections: God the creator, Jesus the liberator and the Holy Spirit, the sustainer.

To do this is to travel where angels fear to tread. For the Trinity is indeed one of those complex theological conundrums that might be easy to say, but difficult to understand. Monks in a particular monastery were always graced with a sermon while they ate their meals. But, on Trinity Sunday, both preacher and monks were given the day off, for it was far too difficult.

We all know that the Trinity is our shorthand for speaking about the unity of God and yet the diversity of God found in the God, Christ and the Holy Spirit. In the eighth century the relationship

between these aspects of the Godhead were discussed and formulated. The result was the Nicene Creed. But, the wording of one part of that creed did not appeal to Christians in the East. They felt that it placed too much emphasis on the unity of the Trinity and not enough on the constituents. They also felt that the West's approach was too rational and did not underscore the essential incomprehensibility of God. It's almost as if the Trinity is something of a paradox, a riddle, a conundrum which draws and encourages thought, prayer and meditation. It is not something that will or can be defined precisely. It is, as one writer put it, something more like a dance amongst three partners. At times one of the three will be more prominent, but it is the relationship and the movement and the symphony between them which is of vital importance.

So, these are simply some opening comments. They set the scene. And I will not pretend to explain the Trinity in great detail; I think a few observations will suffice.

Psalms 8

One of my children's latest haunts these days is Dynamic Earth. For those of you who do not know about it, it is the structure near the new Scottish parliament that looks rather like the millennium dome. Inside there is a great chance to travel back through time. We start with the Big Bang and then, using all sorts of media, such as sound and visuals and smells, we travel from that first moment, through the creation of stars, the early years of the earth, the development of life and then humanity and the world at the present. It is quite enjoyable and stimulating.

One of the first parts of the exhibition is a travel through space as the universe begins. The commentary and the visuals, which are drawn from photos made by the Hubble Telescope, are fascinating indeed. And mind-bending. And mind-boggling. The narrator talks about our nearest galactic neighbour, Andromeda. Its light takes 2 million years to reach us. That's a long time and that's a long way. I can hardly even begin to think about it. And then, in passing, the narrator mentions some of the huge dust clouds which are floating around in space. He mentions that some of them are a light year tall. A light year high. Think about that. Really stop and think about that. It is so far beyond my comprehension that it is almost dizzying. How minute earth is; how minute I am.

And yet, from the perspective of 2,500 years ago, the Psalmist ponders the same feeling, the same thoughts. There is God, the creator, the one who rules over creation. And yet, in the midst of this creation, there are humans. Only a little lower than angels. And God cares for us.

To state it like that almost sounds glib to me. For we see this huge cosmos and it is wondrous. Dust clouds a light year tall; Andromeda's light takes 2 million years to reach us. The ancient Israelites, like the Psalmist, believed that rain came through the holes in the sky marked at night by the stars. But God cares for us.

The psalm has a fascinating structure. God is described and praised in the opening and closing verses. But, interesting enough, there is humanity and our doings in the centre. We may, through God's kindness and grace, have been given sovereignty over the earth. We may be working with God for the good of this earth. But there are limits. And those limits are God. God is around us, above us, beyond us. We are not the end of all things; God is. The Psalmist, in a sense, knows this and structures the Psalm to recognize that humans are important, but God is above and beyond us.

What a mystery it is that God cares for us. But, what a mystery God is. If God is a being that can create such dust clouds, such vast distances in space, then it seems to me that the Eastern Christians have it right: such a God is well beyond me. It is almost impossible to believe.

But, as Paul Williams, a man who converted from Buddhism to Catholicism, asked: 'Why is there something rather than nothing?' Some argue that there is no explanation. Others suggest we can't begin to explain. Williams suggests that it is rational, entirely rational, to propose that it is God. The prime mover. The being on which all else hinges. We may be able to say a lot about the universe, but we still can't explain why. That's God. That's the creator.

Christ: The Liberator

At the end of a service recently, one person approached me, quite upset. This person asked: Where was Jesus? Where was Jesus in that service? The service, the address, it seems, did not focus enough on Jesus. Our saviour, our redeemer, our liberator.

That stung. Partly because there was and is an element of truth in that observation. I probably do not focus enough specifically on Jesus. Karl Barth,

one of the greatest theologians of the twentieth century, emphasized that God works specifically through Christ, the word of God. Christ, above and beyond all culture and human peccadilloes. Then there is Rowan Williams, the Archbishop of Canterbury, who emphasizes that devotion to Jesus is 'utterly intrinsic to the Christian faith'.

And so, if I perhaps err on the side of God rather than Jesus, then I need correction. On a personal level, preaching Jesus and Jesus alone I find dissatisfying. I grew up with many an American televangelist talking about Jesus this and Jesus that. And so often it seemed disingenuous, especially when they wanted money. Too, I often found myself asking the question: what does that mean? Explain it to me. Don't just talk in clichés.

And Rowan Williams emphasizes that a devotion to Jesus can only validly be pursued in a Trinitarian framework that includes God and the Holy Spirit. If we, as many modern preachers and hymn-writers do, focus on a personal devotion to Jesus, then we are detached from an important and rich grounding. A personal devotion to Jesus becomes almost erotic, almost a fantasy partner. For we devote ourselves to Jesus and through his humanity we can contemplate God. Within the Trinity, we can move from and in Jesus into a relationship with God.

As one theologian put it, Jesus' position in the early church is grounded in the Trinity. If God is not present as the Holy Spirit in, with and through the church, there is no possibility of the church being informed by the presence of God in Jesus.

So, Jesus is of course important. The Jesus of the Gospels is the beginning of our faith, the focus of our faith, the commitment of our lives. But Jesus himself pointed so often to the importance of worshipping God; Jesus, pointed to the importance of the Holy Spirit in the maintenance of the church's faith, that the early community might be led in truth when he was physically absent.

Where is Jesus? Jesus is here in virtually every hymn, every prayer, and in most of the addresses. And while Jesus must needs be present, Jesus is a part of a greater complex, a Trinitarian relationship.

The Holy Spirit: The Sustainer

For some of us in the established church, or in established churches, the various understandings of Holy Spirit can be a bit daunting. The Holy Spirit is so often associated with Pentecostal or Charismatic

churches, where people wave their hands, roll around on the floor or speak in tongues. This can be somewhat disquietening. In a sense, maybe it should be. Maybe we in the established churches need some of this zest.

But I find some of the other definitions and descriptions of the Holy Spirit more engaging. Augustine argued that the Holy Spirit is nothing more and nothing less than the love between the Father and the Son, between God and Christ. And, when we look at the Gospels and the oneness between God and Christ, the sense of the Holy Spirit is less daunting. For there was such a oneness between them; and if that Holy Spirit is upon us, there will be a oneness between us and Christ and God.

So too, the Gospels emphasize that the Holy Spirit, the Paraclete, will be there when Christ is gone. It is the Holy Spirit that will teach the disciples when Christ is gone, it is the Holy Spirit that will lead them into truth. There is a felt presence even when Christ is absent. And thus the importance of the Holy Spirit. Needed in the church to discern the presence of God in Christ, necessary to discern the love of God in our world.

And I thus want to end with one comment about relationships. Within the Trinity we have, I believe, a perfection of relationships, grounded in God, transparent in love. A friend of mine once suggested that few people would fight and die for the doctrine of the Trinity. Few of us would fight and die for the doctrine of the Incarnation or for that particular clause, the filioque clause, that caused a rupture between the Eastern and Western churches. But we would fight and die for those we love, for people we know and love in the church, for the way of life, the manner of being, the ideals, dreams and aspirations of the church and its people. For relationships with fellow believers, fellow doubters, with God and Christ. That's what's important.

It's all about relationships, grounded on God and love. Let's develop these. With each other. Let's develop these. With strangers in our midst. Let's develop these, with those in our community. Let's develop all of these. Then, only then, will we know God's love. Then, only then, will we even begin to understand the Trinity. Then, only then, will we even begin to understand God our creator, who spread out the universe, and yet counts us, even us, each one of us, as a child. Thanks be to God.

Amen.

29th May: Trinity 1

THE RAIN CAME DOWN

By Dr Patricia Batstone
Honiton, Devon

Genesis 6:9–22; 7:24; 8:14–19; Psalm 46; Romans
1:16–17; 3:22b–28; Matthew 7:21–29

Noah ... did all that God commanded him.

Genesis 6:22b

Introduction

Many years ago, in a northern city, there was one of those long old Methodist churches where congregations had a habit of sitting at the back, suitably distancing themselves from the slightly elevated pulpit. It maintained a dim shadow of Primitive Methodism but without that denomination's evangelistic zeal. It had definite expectations from its preachers – but even in the context of an academic circuit, any spoken or visual form of scholarship was not among them.

This was in the era when the word 'Lectionary' was anathema to preachers and congregations alike, which led to a situation where, for three weeks running, different preachers took as their theme 'The Flood' – an instance that only came to light weeks later at a meeting of the circuit preachers. They hadn't been too happy – first with a young man with dubious theology, then with – a young mum who enjoyed graphically describing events, and finally with an older man. Two might have been tolerated with little comment. A third was one too many.

At first, it was greeted as a joke, with a few cautionary remarks from the clergy on how this might have been avoided, but then the question was posed, 'Was God saying something to that church?'

If the first two had used vivid images of water, flood and, of course, a rainbow, had the third built on those pictures and gone unheard – or ignored because they didn't want to hear any more of it?

It was very likely that as Jesus drew His discourse on the mountainside to a close, there were those listening who were closing their ears to the insistence of certain themes – their own personal message in all that was being said.

In today's readings we find the kind of exhortation intended to make hearers (or readers) sit up and take notice. We read them as commands from God, first

to the individual or group receiving them, but then we might ask ourselves what their relevance is for us, where we are, as we look at this story of Noah in the context of this rather bitty and complex set of readings.

1. Command

We begin with our text – *Noah ... did all that God commanded him*. But what a command! *Make yourself an ark* – a huge boat. Give it a roof, a door and three decks ...

And Noah's reaction? He could have asked the what, why and when of his situation (and probably did) – but summarizing the account we have, Michael Townsend says, 'When God tells him to build the ark he immediately orders wood and starts going to carpentry classes'¹ – with God as his teacher. And Von Rad adds that Noah completed the entire structure without knowing God's intention; he had only the command which drove him to blind obedience, and to build a ship on dry land.²

What was God doing? Testing his obedience and faith, says Von Rad.

God, we may note, had a habit of putting people to the test – He still does, though usually in less bizarre ways. Years later he would test Abraham; later still, He would test the obedience of a very young and innocent girl called Mary; and finally He put His own Son to the ultimate test in which He went through death.

What links these other tests with Noah is the matter of *choice*. God had *chosen* Noah even though he was, to quote Townsend again, 'the best of a bad bunch'. But it was not because he was perfect or merited being chosen. He was as much a sinner as any human – and those 'little weaknesses' would show themselves very graphically before much time back on dry land was out. It was because, despite all the worldliness, corruption and immorality around him, Noah had remained faithful to his God.

And that was enough for the Grace of God to work with – except that He had to be sure, and He had also to find a way of fulfilling His purpose of saving that small remnant of creation.

So God said, 'Build a boat ...'

¹ Henry McKeating, *Mining the Meaning* – Companion to the Revised Common Lectionary, Year A (London: Epworth, 2001).

² *Genesis*, Old Testament Library (London: SCM Press, 1972).

2. Cost

But it wasn't really as simple as that. Building a boat on dry land in public view was no mean thing to do. It was to be a costly exercise – as numerous films and documentaries on the story have demonstrated – for it cost Noah his friends and worse still, those of his family; it cost him his credibility in that pagan place – and it could well almost have cost him his sanity.

Paul was just one of those who knew what it was to face the cost of being obedient to the call of God. Even today, in many countries, Christians and Jews are still persecuted for their faith.

But blind obedience can have its downside. If the person doesn't hold on to faith in the wider context it can become fanatical and send the mind over the abyss of reason.

We can imagine those watching Noah waiting for the signs as they ridiculed him. In their eyes he was getting it all wrong.

Jesus knew the cost of bad building. Build a mud brick Palestinian house on the bottom of a wadi, where it is sandy and vulnerable to floods, and you were asking for it to be swept away the minute it rained. The person who knew what he was doing built on the bedrock – a secure foundation. Jesus' hearers at the time would understand for He was speaking their language. They listened, and learnt that there was not only a physical but a spiritual foundation. Neglect the firm foundation and the cost could be tremendous.

In Noah's case, the cost of following God's command was high – but the cost of disregarding God's will would have been even higher, given the context in which he lived.

3. Courage

So, in spite of it all, his faith in God gave him the courage to go on with what must have seemed a next to impossible task.

Was he alone in this, or had he his family on his side, even before God's purposes became plain? Perhaps they had no option in a culture in which the patriarch's word was law, second only to God's.

Building finished, Noah took his courage in both hands and loaded the boat. This has been a film-maker's dream, with the animals being rounded up, all the time to the accompaniment of jeering crowds punctuated by individual friends of the family who declined the invitation to be 'saved' from the flood – not to mention the lone pair of unicorns

tossing their heads in derision. It must be one of the best loved of all children's Bible stories!

Yet beneath the surface is that theological and spiritual urgency that Paul is endeavouring to press home to the Romans.

Noah and his family were being 'saved' from the floods to come – from the very wrath of God that would rain down upon the earth till it and all on it was engulfed. The words 'saved' and 'salvation' can be used very widely to indicate deliverance from peril or plague, from war or want, from prison or paralysis into a state of wholeness and health. However, it is noted that in all his writing, Paul not only uses the word in relation to God in which his readers and hearers are promised 'a safe passage to eternal bliss' but in the broader context of community. It is a collective social word.

Just so in Noah's time. While it was Noah whose faith caught God's attention, his whole family, believers or not at the time, were included, as would anyone else who might have summoned up the courage to step into the ark.

In the early church we note time after time that when one man came to faith, his whole family was baptized with him. There was no individualism. Paul was concerned to reach out to communities – Jewish and Greek – but within the communities it was now expected that individual members would share the common faith for themselves.

If Noah's family had not been of one mind during their time in the ark, there could have been disastrous consequences.

Just so, unless the members of a church are united in the faith, they will not appeal to the world that watches and looks for solid foundation.

'The Christian life begins with faith and is maintained through faith,' implies John Wesley.³ For Paul it was a matter of maintaining the courage of his convictions and not being ashamed to declare his faith, regardless of the company he kept. For Noah, as the rain began to fall, it was also a case of having the courage of his convictions and seeing his faith confirmed.

4. Covenant

The rain fell, and the floods came and the wind blew and beat against that house without foundation, and it fell – hard.

³ Notes on the New Testament (London: Epworth Press, 1976).

Individuals and church communities all need to build firmly, to lay foundations on solid rock, to choose the master bricklayer, and plan for structures that will last to eternity.

There is a verse in the Manx fisherman's hymn that reads,

Strong is Thine arm; our little barques are frail:
Send us Thy help; remember Galilee.⁴

Those little barques are far frailer than Noah's grand boat, which neither wind, nor rain, nor storm could batter. Faith and courage were needed to sail in them – and the cost could be incalculable.

Sometimes only spiritual preparedness can have any effect on the storms of life. Becoming a Christian does not guarantee a smooth life. Illness, bereavement, the trauma of losing an unborn child or giving birth to one that is not physically perfect and beautiful, redundancy, break-up of relationships, accident, injury, abuse – all these things and more besides shake our foundations, test our faith and cause us to doubt. Standing firm in God's promises is no easy option.

But God's grace is stronger than all our trials and however imperfectly we emerge from them, we have the assurance that 'Grace indicates that salvation is not because of our merits, but because of God's love'.⁵

Just hold on to that faith, says Paul; build on it – on Me – says Jesus – and you *will gain* a safe passage through the storm, however long it takes.

The rain came and lashed at the ark for nearly forty days, and then began to peter out till all became calm, and nothing moved.

And the ark was becalmed for one hundred and fifty days. That must have been the most frightening time of all. What was God doing? Had He fallen asleep and forgotten them? Or was this just a calm before another storm?

Eventually Noah began to wonder. To test the scenery, he let a raven loose but it circled round and

round with nowhere to land. Then he sent out a dove. Back it came. Seven days later he despatched it again – and this time it returned with a fresh olive leaf in its beak. Another week, and it was gone for good.

Then the Word of God came to him and reiterated the promise He had made. Noah was spared, and he and his family and flock would be a party to the covenant promise God was making. From now on, there would be no more Divine destruction in the world, and those who were faithful would be blessed by Him.

We may look out on our troubled world and wonder at the human destruction we see all around us, and may even question why God seems to do nothing to stop it all. Is He breaking His side of the bargain? Or are we?

Both Jesus and Paul were adamant that we are the sinners – but God's Grace continually rescues and saves us from the consequences, however bleak or stormy the outlook may be.

Conclusion

It doesn't matter whether we believe the story of Noah or not. What matters is that it is a vivid and dramatic account of the way in which the Grace of God relates to His creatures and brings order out of chaos in the lives of those, individuals and groups, who keep faith with Him, disregard the cost of service, have the courage of their convictions and accept the responsibilities of their side of the Covenant.

So what might have been the message to that tired and beleaguered congregation? One of comfort, encouragement – or complaint? In distancing themselves from the pulpit had they, in effect, distanced themselves from God?

On being confronted by that Old Testament deluge, did they see their own world in perspective and realize their need of a firmer foundation and a spiritual roof to keep the rain out?

These and other questions are no less relevant here, in today's church, today's disrupted world, and in our own stories and threatened lives. Let us face them with courage and commitment, regardless of cost, and constantly renew our own covenant with God.

⁴ William Henry Gill: 'Hear us, O Lord, from heaven, Thy dwelling-place.'

⁵ Notes in *The Wesley Bible: a Personal Study Bible for Holy Living*, NKJV (Nashville, TN: Thos. Nelson, 1990).

Coming Next Month . . . Paul Ballard explores the role of the Church in the city-centre and Graeme Auld offers a new way to read the beginning of Genesis. The Book of the Month is Charles E. Hill's *The Johannine Corpus in the Early Church*.