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## **Sermons for the Christian Year**

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# SERMONS FOR THE CHRISTIAN YEAR

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2nd May: 4th of Easter

## THE SHEPHERD'S VOICE

*By the Revd Ron Dale  
Harrogate*

Acts 9:36-43; Revelation 7:9-17; John 10:22-30

After a most interesting and enjoyable pilgrimage to the Holy Land, a friend related how he'd seen a number of different flocks of sheep milling about around a water hole, with the shepherds in a group talking among themselves. When the sheep had been well watered, each shepherd called out in a loud voice in arabic, 'Follow me, follow me.' Immediately the sheep separated out and went obediently to their shepherd, standing before him quietly. Before moving on to fresh pastures, my friend asked one shepherd if he could borrow his head dress (*keffaya*) and outer robe so that he could act as shepherd and call the sheep. Well, he tried hard, shouting the same words, but the sheep completely ignored him; but when their true shepherd called, they immediately went to him; for me a lovely illustration of Jesus' words in John 10:27: 'My sheep hear my voice. I know them, and they follow me.'

Now all sheep look alike to me, all having four legs, two eyes and ears, a nose and a tail, and mainly black and white, but not so for the shepherd; and when Jesus says, 'I know my own and my own know me,' He isn't talking about intellectual knowledge, but rather a personal knowledge, based on practical everyday experience and personal contact. Jesus calls himself the Good shepherd, the Greek word he uses for 'good' is *kalos* meaning that which is beautiful, morally excellent, worthy, virtuous and upright. As such a shepherd he goes before his flock leading it to green pastures and still waters, therefore to places of refreshment and renewal; at the same time making sure that no real harm comes to any of his flock. There may be patches of desert and stoney ground

at times, but he sees the flock safely through. And so it is for us as we trust and follow him.

I believe that our experience of the Good Shepherd is the constant experience of three lovely gifts.

It is first of all the constant experience of grace, and I know of no better thinking on the meaning of grace than that which Dietrich Bonhoeffer gives in his 'Cost of Discipleship':

'Cheap grace is the preaching of forgiveness without requiring repentance, baptism without Church discipline, Communion without confession. Cheap grace is grace without discipleship, grace without the cross, grace without Jesus Christ, living and incarnate.'

Costly grace is the Gospel which must be sought again and again, the gift which must be asked for, the door at which you must knock.

Such grace is costly because it calls us to follow, *and it is grace because it calls us to follow Jesus Christ*. It is costly because it costs you your life, *and it is grace because it gives you the only true life ...* Above all, it is costly because it cost God the life of his Son and what has cost God much cannot be cheap for us. Above all, it is grace because God did not reckon his Son too dear a price to pay for our life, but delivered him up for us. Costly grace is the incarnation of God.' And then, our experience of Jesus, the Good shepherd is also the constant experience of mercy.

Philip Keller, a very experienced sheep-man has written a wise book about sheep and shepherding, here he is describing sheep in his little book, 'A Shepherd Looks at Psalm 23':

'The strange thing about sheep is that because of their very make-up it is almost impossible for them to be made to lie down unless four requirements are met.

Owing to their timidity they refuse to lie down unless they are free from fear.

Because of the social behaviour within a flock, sheep will not lie down unless they are free from friction with others of their kind.

If tormented by flies or parasites, sheep will not lie down. Only when they are free of these pests can they relax.

Lastly, sheep will not lie down as long as they feel in need of finding food. They must be free from hunger.

It is significant that to be at rest their must be a definite sense of freedom from fear, tension, aggravation and hunger. The unique aspect of the picture is that it is only the sheep-man himself who can provide release from these anxieties.... It is actually he who makes it possible for them to lie down, to rest, relax, to be content and flourishing.

A flock that is restless, discontented, always agitated and disturbed never does well.

And the same is true of people.

I would say that it is true for the Church, the flock and body of Christ. The Good News is that in loving mercy the Good Shepherd deals with our restlessness, discontentment, agitation and friction with others.

Finally our experience of Jesus is the constant experience of his peace. Because we have received grace and mercy in our times of need, we are at peace with God.

Mahatma Gandhi that great Indian statesman once said: 'I am a man of peace. I believe in peace. But I do not want peace at any price. I do not want the peace you find in stone. I do not want the peace you find in the grave; but I do want the peace you find embedded in the human breast, which is exposed to the arrows of the whole world but which is protected from all harm by the power of Almighty God.' And for us it is Jesus who says to his flock in times of need: 'Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you,' and he does so in grace and mercy, as only he, the Good shepherd can.

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9th May: Fifth of Easter

## HOW TO CHANGE YOUR MIND

*By the Revd Martin Camroux  
Cheam*

Acts 11:1-18

Is it ever good to change our mind about what we believe? There are some to whom the answer is clearly no. In one of my churches there was a young woman in her twenties who was new to the Church.

So one Sunday I asked her to do the reading. She was outraged. Scripture, she said, made it clear that women should keep silent in Church. 'I hope one day you'll change your mind,' I said. She exploded. 'I already know the truth. Why should I ever need to change my mind?'

I suppose that's the point. If we already know the truth fully and completely then there will never be any need to change our mind. If on the other hand Paul was right when he said our knowledge is incomplete, if John Robinson was right when he said, 'The Lord has yet more let more truth to break forth from his word', then sometimes we must change our minds if ever we are to develop and grow.

Our New Testament reading illustrates this. It's about one of the great mind changes in the history of the church. The first Christians were all Jews and kept the Jewish law. Then the gospel began to spread among Gentiles. The question then came – must Gentiles keep the law as Jews did? Debate raged.

On the one side is the Jerusalem church. They are the mother Church of the faith. James, Jesus' own brother, heads them. Most of the apostles belonged. To them the law was part of the essence of their faith; it was there in book after book of scripture. How can anyone set it aside? It was unthinkable. Then there is Paul. Full of challenging new ideas. Thinking unthinkable thoughts. Saying essentially 'New occasions teach new duties.' If the gospel is going to break the barrier between Greek and Jew we must not lay the law upon them. The Church must be inclusive, there equally for all.

And here is Peter. And Peter is in his usual state of mind. He is in an agony of indecision. He has grown up with the old ways. How can he break them? But then at Joppa he has a vision that persuades him that the old ways no longer apply. The Church must break with the past. His mind begins to change. He breaks with the closed view of the Jerusalem Church. The whole future of Christianity was dependent on a change of mind.

Looking at Peter, there are three key factors that lead him to change his mind. Firstly he is influenced by other Christians. He is open to the arguments of those like Paul who start with a conviction different to his own. Here is the first point about changing our minds. When Christians take different views, is it possible that sometimes, someone else might have seen more than we have? I think that was part of what was so sad about that young woman. That

possibility did not seem to have occurred to her. She had grown up in a very narrow kind of Christianity. To put it bluntly, they were convinced that they had the truth – other Christians who disagreed with them were simply wrong.

That kind of view is too common. Sometimes we imagine the truth is with us and the further you get from us the less truth there is. Once you take that sort of attitude you are caught in a trap. Because you think you have the truth you are condemned to stay where you are. Inevitably any conversation you have with other Christians is about you setting them right. Be like that and you end up a closed system; to use Sylvia Plath's analogy, it's like being in a bell-jar, forever re-breathing our own fetid air. If we think like that, it's time we let God shake us up a bit. When we share with other Christians, often there will be truths they can share with us that we have not seen.

Secondly, life changes Peter's mind for him. He starts with the narrow theology that God's grace is only for those within Israel. And then life confounds his theology. He met Christians who did not follow the law he loved so much. And yet it was clear to him that the Holy Spirit was among them. So Peter did the big thing – he let life revise theology.

This kind of thing happens the whole time. You work out a theological position. It seems right. Then life teaches you it isn't like that at all. Let me give you a personal example. For a long while I believed that, because before you took communion you should have a real understanding of what was going on, Communion must be for adults only. Then I became a parent and I changed my mind. We were at the Methodist holiday home at Sidmouth for a Church family Weekend. We ended with communion. My children were present. When I came to my daughter I passed her by. After the service she was sitting crying. What's wrong? Why hadn't I given her communion? I could think of no answer. Her faith was a child's but it was just as real as any adult's. She was as much part of the Church family as anyone there at that weekend. What did I always say at Communion? Those who love the lord are welcome at his table. I went back and gave her communion. If you are going to grow as a Christian sometimes you must be willing to let life teach you your theology is wrong. Every honest theology ought to be open to be corrected by the facts.

Thirdly, Peter found new truth in Christ. It's good to change one's mind. But the question is how and in what way. As Chesterton said, 'The point about an open mind is to shut it on something solid.' At the end of the day I have one simple conviction about the truth and it is this. That there is nowhere else in our whole human story that you find it as clearly as you do in Jesus the carpenter of Nazareth. Changing our minds is about finding what following him means today.

2000 years separates us from Jesus. He lives in a world very different from ours. But looking at him I find a figure of incomparable moral power. Compare with Paul. I love Paul's writings. But every now and then I come across somewhere where since his day new truth has come. When he says women should keep silent in Church or slaves obey masters, we see that there is now a new and better truth. Or when he explains homosexuality by suggesting that God inflicted this nature upon homosexuals as a punishment, it is clear that this understanding of homosexuality is no longer in accord with our best insights – and nor is the understanding of God. You can do that with Paul. But where can you do that with Jesus? The amazing thing is that after 2000 years he is not behind us morally but ahead. He was bigger than his contemporaries and he is bigger than us still. The closer you come to him the closer you will be to the truth. For he is the reality behind all our dreaming, the clue for which we are all groping, the answer to all our prayers. May our minds be changed by his so that we may know the truth and the truth may set us free.

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16th May: Sixth of Easter

### A SPIRITUAL KIND OF LOVING

*By the Revd Kerr Spiers  
Glasgow*

Acts 16:9–15; Psalm 67; John 14:23–29

In the warm evangelical background of my childhood I remember being asked if I loved the Lord. This was the sign and hallmark of personal Christianity. But the idea of loving God is set forth as the apex of the spiritual life in all the traditions of the Christian faith. Love God and do what you like is the famous epigram of Saint Augustine. And the mediaeval mystics speak and write of loving God as the supreme

purpose of life not because there is some pay-off to be had but because it is the very fulfilment of human creation. So Francis Xavier of the sixteenth century writes:

Not with the hope of gaining aught;  
Not seeking a reward;  
But as Thyself hast loved me,  
O ever-loving Lord  
E'en so I love Thee, and will love,  
And in Thy praise will sing;  
Solely because Thou art my God  
And my eternal King.

All the elements of Christian devotion, liturgy, worship and sacrament are vehicles of our love for God. Our hymns proclaim it. Our prayers verbalize it. Our preaching is grounded in it. Baptism and Holy Communion involve our human response to that great divine love which we have beheld in the face of Jesus Christ.

And behind all these demonstrations of our love of God is the witness of scripture setting forth a great dialogue of love: God's love made manifest to us in Jesus Christ, 'God so loved the world . . .'; and our responsive love: 'you will love the Lord your God with all your mind and heart and strength.' And then this: ' . . . and you will love your neighbour as yourself.' No postscript this. No addendum. But totally integrated as part of the Great Commandment.

And this brings us to the heart of our reflection on love. First there is God's love. In faith we see and indeed accept in gratitude the active saving love of God revealed in the life, death and resurrection of Christ. As John puts it: 'Not that we loved God but that He loved us and gave His son as the expiation for our sins.' It is not always easy in this world to lay hold on the faith that confirms the truth of such an affirmation. But when we do so we surely feel that when writers like John Newton and Charles Wesley used the adjective 'amazing' to describe God's love they have hit on the right word.

But then there is that other genre of love – that of neighbour. This kind of love is made up of small kindnesses right through to the most heroic of sacrificial actions. My Indian neighbour in our multi-cultural neighbourhood comes in and mends a fault in my central heating boiler. Can we put that into the category of loving your neighbour? My other neighbour hands in the morning newspaper on learning that we are somewhat off colour. It is not

quite analogous but it is a bit like the modern version of the cup of cold water that Jesus spoke about. But the rope of neighbourly love spreads a long way and reaches to all the world through prisons, concentration camps, hospitals, war zones, earthquakes and famine. In the bleakest places on earth the commandment of the Lord to love one's neighbour has found almost incredible expression.

All this means that we can relate to love as a description of God's relationship to us and furthermore as a description of our highest ethical relationship with our neighbour near or far. But with what existential or human content can we apply meaning to the idea of loving God? When Julian of Norwich or Simone Weil speak about the spiritual summit as love for God what do they mean? Is it a feeling? Is it an emotion? Is it a state of mystical sensitivity?

In the New Testament we have some insight into the nature of this love from the presence of Jesus. And since he is the face of God there is an interchangeability in the language used about God and that used about Jesus. Love for Jesus is love for God. And love for God is channelled through love for Jesus. Therefore when it is sometimes the one and sometimes the other that is the object of love we are talking about the same thing: a spiritual love that links us to the ground of all being expressed for us in the being of the Father and the being of the Son. Both are to be set in our hearts as the object of our spiritual love. So in his description of Jesus' teaching in the Upper Room John has Jesus speak of the Father who is loved through the Son. Jesus replied, 'If anyone loves me, he will obey my teaching. My Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him. He who does not love me will not obey my teaching. These words you hear are not my own; they belong to the Father who sent me.'

So love of the Lord is more than a feeling; it engages the will. It is about obedience. That is what Jesus says: 'If anyone loves me he will obey my teaching . . . He who does not love me will not obey my teaching.' This is the truth that is at the core of the encounter between the Risen Lord and Simon Peter as John records it. Three times Jesus challenges him with a direct question about his love and loyalty: 'Peter, do you love me?' And three times Jesus translates the meaning of such love into a life of obedient service: 'Feed my sheep. Feed my lambs.'

None of us sees the light of obedience shining with undimmed clarity all the time. And there are

situations that are so complex that we cannot see the way of obedience. We pray for the 'kindly light' of John Henry Newman's hymn 'amid the encircling gloom'. For all that in the broad scope of our lives the sense of obedience to God as the motivating element is an expression of our love for God. Micah set it out with startling clarity: 'What does the Lord require of thee but to do justly, love mercy and walk humbly with God.'

And that principle of spiritual obedience, as an expression of our love for God, confers upon life the blessing of *shalom* (peace). As Jesus says: 'Peace I leave with you; peace I give you.' It is an inner sense that dwells within those who like Paul have not been disobedient to the heavenly vision but have sought to love God by responding to the human condition after the example of Jesus himself.

23rd May: Seventh of Easter

## A SILENT EARTHQUAKE

*By the Revd Peter Chave  
Hatley, Plymouth*

Acts 16:16–34; Revelation 22:12–14, 16–17, 20–21;  
John 17:20–26

The prisoners listened wistfully as the new arrivals Paul and Silas sang haunting hymns in the innermost cell. They had been brought in – and beaten – for 'disturbing the peace': some fracas with a young fortune teller. 'I know what you are up to,' she had shouted: proclaiming a way of salvation. Paul got angry, and took her magic powers away!

The prisoners sat there in their chains, thoughtful, as night wore on.

Suddenly, about midnight, a violent earthquake rocked the jail. Each prisoner saw all the doors burst open. Each individually registered the moment when 'my chains fell off'.

'Come on, then, lads', shouted Paul and Silas, who were natural leaders,

'The Most High God has miraculously liberated us. This way for salvation. Follow us!' Stopping merely to kill the *Kommandant* and steal his chariot, off Paul and Silas and the others sped, soon making good their Great Escape.

Sorry, I got a bit carried away there! But that is the story everyone expected: a story that exists

in various forms in Greek and Roman, and more modern literature. Your god (or God) miraculously opens prison doors for you. What do you do? What, Paul and Silas? – you just sit there? Please! What a pathetic ending?

The *Kommandant* – sorry, the jailer, did not think so. He had been so convinced his convicts must have fled. He was about to 'fall on his sword' in the approved Roman manner. Paul called to him just in time:

'Don't do it. We are all here.' The miracle that night for the jailer was not in the earthquake but in the still loud voice of Paul.

Why did not Paul and Silas cut and run? Because the jailer would have died; and that mattered to them. The *Torah* had taught them they must love their neighbour as themselves (cf. Luke 10:27). Jesus had spelled out the hard case, that this included loving their enemies (Luke 6:27). So they stayed put.

An on-cue earthquake would surely have won Paul and Silas some attention in Philippi. Some people at least would have tried to get straight the half-heard story about the no-longer profitable prophetic.

This slave girl was, in our terms, mentally ill. In the terms of the day, she 'had a spirit'. Her illness included strange flashes of seeing very clearly indeed. She really had said, and kept on saying day-after-day, 'These men are servants of the Most High God, who proclaim to you a way of salvation.' This positive message does not make her any less a troubled soul. When people were too dim to respond to Jesus, the evil spirits recognized him and cried out his identity, in fear.

Paul got annoyed: not just, one hopes, with the fuss the girl was making, but with the whole set-up in which her masters exploited her illness for money, and the 'spirit' held her in thrall. In Jesus' name Paul ordered the spirit to get out of her. This must have been a real salvation for her. But no one stops to tell us how much better she felt. 'Never mind that', thought her masters, 'as the spirit exited, so did our chance of profit.' They bundled Paul and Silas off to suffer the punishment of those who upset Philippi's hallowed (if exploitative) traditions.

The earthquake would have made some people re-assess these events. Presumably the magistrates did just that: for they sent word in the morning to let Paul and Silas go. How delicious this story becomes when Paul won't then let the magistrates go. He insists they come in person to make a grovel-



ling apology. [All this happens *after* today's passage and does not detract from it. Paul and Silas had no knowledge that they were going to be released.]

The nub of the story is not, however, in the earthquake but in the love shown by Paul and Silas to the jailer. He falls at their feet. His rescue from death seems to have revealed to him a need for rescue in his living. The weirdly wonderful self-sacrifice of Paul and Silas suggests they may have what he needs. 'What must I do to be saved?' 'Believe in the Lord Jesus' say Paul and Silas. The word of the Lord is spoken, and the whole household believes.

'Gosh, look at your wounds', says the jailer, and washes them. Then in the same verse – a lovely touch by the author – he and his entire household are washed in return, in the waters of baptism. They have been loved, at cost (the cost of Paul and Silas' freedom), into the Kingdom.

In John 17 Jesus prays for his disciples, present and to come, including Paul and Silas, and you, and me. The familiar prayer is 'that they may all be one'. But notice how this comes about: 'may they be (one) *in us*' (v. 21). Paul and Silas acted that night as Jesus would have done; they responded to events in the spirit of God himself. When Christians act in such ways the world may indeed, bit by bit, believe.

Revelation 22 underlines that it is our 'work' (v. 12) to spread far and wide the free offer of salvation – 'water of life as a gift' (v. 17). If we do, we shall not, finally, lose by it (v. 12).

Salvation comes to Philippi. Paul brings health to the slave girl – and saves the jailer's life. What about the other prisoners? Insofar as they had followed Paul and Silas' lead they had the comfort of knowing they too had done the right thing.

The prison background irresistibly starts suggesting morals to us: You can be free even though you are inside a cell. You can be 'at large' yet far from liberated, miles from salvation. Such thoughts must be handled carefully, never becoming clichés in which we see silver linings in other folks' misfortune. Not every prisoner is a Bonhoeffer or a Mandela, and neither of these *enjoyed* incarceration.

Let us pray earnestly for all in prison, whether justly or unjustly placed there. May 'a way of salvation' find them, even in unpropitious circumstances.

Most of us live in quite propitious circumstances and – it is true – these do not guarantee us salvation

or true liberty. Think of those Philippian magistrates. They were pressured into jailing Paul and Silas, then pressured (by an earthquake) into letting them go. They came and apologized to them, but still asked them to leave the city. Vested interests weigh so heavily that many cannot cope with 'a way of salvation'. Faced with disturbing heralds of a counter-intuitive love, too many ask them please to leave their city.

Part of the challenge of our disciple's work (Rev. 22:12) is undoubtedly to put all this in terms that resonate with the twenty-first century. How do we market our 'way of salvation' today? The rest is just to be there when suddenly it is clear that someone does require saving, healing, freeing, rescuing, here and now. God needs one or more of his disciples, probably at some cost, to deliver his love at the point of need. AMEN.

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30th May: Pentecost

## PENTECOST

*By the Revd Dr Stephen B. Dawes, MA  
Truro, England*

Acts 1:1–21 (Genesis 11:1–9) Romans 8:14–17;  
John 14:8–17

We played an interesting game before the young people left for their teaching session. Many of the worship aids for today simply call Pentecost the 'Birthday' of the Church, and the suggestions they make for all age worship include balloons, birthday cakes, candles, streamers and party poppers, even singing 'Happy Birthday'. But we put that to the test, and asked ourselves the question – What really is the Birthday of the Church? We got some interesting answers. Today – Pentecost, was, of course, one. Christmas, was another. The calling of the first disciples was an unexpected one. Then there was Good Friday and Easter Day. When we added up the votes we found that the majority of us had got it wrong. For the right answer, at least according to St Paul, is Easter Day (1 Cor. 5:13–14). Without Easter Day we would not be here. No Easter Day would have meant no Faith to preach or believe, no Christianity and no Church: but with the resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ at that first Easter, St Paul insists, the Church is born.

That's also the way John's Gospel tells the story. In its Easter Day story it is on the evening of that Resurrection Day that the Risen Jesus breathed his gift of the Holy Spirit onto and into the first disciples in the Upper Room as he had promised (John 20:19–23). That is rather different from Luke's way of telling it in the Acts of the Apostles. So if we go with Paul and John on this one we are left with a teasing question: if today is not the Birthday of the Church, then what is it? What is Pentecost? What is that reading from Acts 2 about?

There is, fortunately, an answer. We know, for as near certain as we know anything, that Jesus was crucified at Passover. In that festival the Jews celebrated their salvation, their deliverance in the days of Moses, the great events in which God rescued their ancestors from slavery and led them out of oppression into freedom. That's what Passover was about, and the early Christian thinkers and preachers were not slow to point out that in the death of Jesus God had brought about a new salvation, done another rescue, and delivered them from the powers of death and sin into a new life of freedom. Fifty days after Passover came the celebration of Pentecost. That festival celebrated the arrival of Moses at Mt Sinai, when the slaves God had brought out of Egypt gathered at the holy mountain to worship their Saviour God and receive his blessing. Moses went up the mountain, into the wind and fire of God's holy presence on its summit, and came down with God's gift of a new covenant. The LORD would be their God; they would be his people. His practical blessing was the gift of *Torah*, which we so misleadingly call the 'Law', but which Jews celebrate to this day as God's great gift of Teaching, Guidance and Blessing, which helps them to walk in his ways and live as his people, in faith and hope and love and blessing. Pentecost was and is a celebration of God's presence with his people and of his blessing them with his gift of the *Torah*, the Teaching that gives life, strengthens faith and builds up the community in love.

So now we can see what St Luke has done. Fifty days after God's mighty new act of Passover salvation in the death of Jesus, at the Pentecost celebration of God's gift of *Torah* at Sinai and all that that Holy Covenant means, Luke is giving the early Christians their festival in which to celebrate the new gift of God's Spirit and the New Covenant. As Easter is the Christian Passover celebration of

God saving his people, so today is the Christian Pentecost celebration of God blessing his people, equipping them to walk in his ways, to live and work to his praise and glory, to be his people named with the name of Christ.

And we can spell that out a bit more from our readings. In the wind, fire and strange languages drama of the gift of the Holy Spirit in Acts chapter two, Luke is pointing to the presence of God with and for the community as it gathers together – remember its opening key words 'Day of Pentecost' and 'all together in one place'. God's presence is experienced in that gathering in a powerful way which equips them for mission, for telling the good news of God's salvation throughout the world. This blessing, Luke is at pains to explain, is for all, young and old, men and women, near and far. It is the blessing of experiencing ourselves to be the children of God, as we read in that snippet from Romans, feeling the intimacy and the warmth of God's love for each of us to which we respond by calling him 'Abba, Father.' It is the blessing of being strengthened, confirmed, assured, individually and corporately, by God's inner strengthening, as promised in today's Gospel reading from John.

For some Christians today, this is dramatic stuff. For them it speaks of the power of God at work, of things happening, people and situations being affected, changed and transformed. They rejoice that Luke's Pentecost is noisy, that people outside hear and want to know what is happening; that Paul's Roman Christian cries out, 'Abba! Father!' with exclamation marks and that John's promise is for an Advocate, a Champion, a Helper who stands with us and among us. For them these Pentecost readings talk of spiritual power given to empower the Church and to transform the Christian with tangible results in mind, a Church and a Christian nerved and equipped for sharing in God's mission to transform the world.

Other Christians today find this uncomfortable. They see that there can be harmful and dangerous results when churches and Christians go down that 'power' road, and so they move quickly on, embarrassed, to quieter spiritualities and less obtrusive missions. They look at Luke's Pentecost picture and see Moses and Mt Sinai behind it, and remember that the Jews never went back to Sinai, but went on and found their God with them wherever they went



and in their ordinary days and ways. They see Paul's Roman Christian blessed by a quieter intimacy with God. And they are grateful that the Spirit promised in John 14 is called 'Comforter' in the Authorised Version and 'Counsellor' in some modern ones. For them these Pentecost readings testify to a supporting and encouraging presence, a companion on the journey, as God seeks to bind all creation together in love.

At Pentecost, the Jews celebrated the blessings they had been given – a God who loved them, their exodus rescue from slavery and the gift of God's Story to live by. At Pentecost, Luke invites us to celebrate our blessings too – the same God who loves us, our Easter rescue from death and the gift of God's presence to live in and by. For all our differences in understanding these mysteries, Luke's invitation is one we can all share.

## REVIEW ARTICLE

### *Pontius Pilate: Portraits of a Roman Governor*

**W**HETHER as a saint or a sinner, Pontius Pilate has captured the imaginations of Christian dramatists, artists and novelists for centuries. As someone who herself published a book on Pilate five years ago (reviewed in this journal, vol. 110 (1999), 309–10), I looked forward to the arrival of my review copy of Warren Carter's *Pontius Pilate: Portraits of a Roman Governor* (Liturgical Press, 2003. \$14.95. pp. ix + 162. ISBN 0-8146-5113-5) with some enthusiasm. I was, however, disappointed.

After a brief survey of the ways in which Pilate has been understood throughout Christian history, Carter provides us with an overview of the Roman empire and its governors. Drawing heavily on the work of G. E. Lenski and others, we are told that the Roman empire was, by its very nature, evil, its governors corrupt and self-serving. Carter is continually shocked by the unaccountable, undemocratic and hierarchical nature of 'the system'. The problem with his reconstruction, however, is that the evidence is not evenly handled. When Josephus, for example, has anything harsh to say about particular Roman governors, he is quoted at length, yet his favourable comments regarding the legates Petronius and Vitellius are overlooked. Pliny too – the only Roman governor to have left a substantial correspondence – is completely ignored. It is also a shame that 'for reasons of space' Carter decides not to look at Josephus' and Philo's portraits

of Pilate in any detail. Analyses of these texts would have led to a more rounded picture of Pilate, and would have avoided the glaring inaccuracy that Pilate erected Roman shields in the Jerusalem Temple (p. 14 – even Philo only charges him with bringing the shields into the Roman praetorium!). More worrying still is Carter's treatment of the gospels. He intends to look at Pilate as a literary character in all four texts, combining literary and historical criticism with a post-colonial approach. The difficulty here is that although Carter knows that post-colonial approaches are agenda driven and represent only one possible reading of a text (pp. 31–34), his treatment of the gospels – together with his historical survey of governors, and the book's earlier assertion that it will look at the way in which each text 'interfaces with [its] historical-cultural world' (p. viii) – strongly suggests that Carter believes his reading is the one most likely to be held by the original gospel audiences.

While I find a harsh picture of Pilate plausible in the gospels of Mark and John (and have in fact argued for almost identical readings in my own book), I find it much more difficult to imagine that the same is true of Matthew and Luke. Was the evangelist who highlighted Jewish hostility towards Jesus as early as the birth narratives, included a diatribe against the 'scribes and Pharisees' (Matt. 23) and added a number of anti-Jewish touches to his Roman trial narrative really so preoccupied with presenting