

## SERMON FOR TRINITY 2 - 17 JUNE 2007

While I know that the only reason that Colin has invited us here is to give him a Sunday off preaching, I do want to say, on behalf of all of us at St Martin's Bradford, how grateful we are to him, to Anne and to all the team here who have worked so hard to look after us so wonderfully well since we arrived in Belfast on Friday evening. You have been so generous with your hospitality and we will long remember both the quality and the size of the meals we have enjoyed all around the Mourne Mountains yesterday. Thank you all so very much.

But why have we come? I suppose, quite selfishly, we have come to enjoy the wonderful acoustics of singing in this Church and we want to say a special thank-you to Geoffrey the organist for his unflappable kindness in accommodating a bunch of amateur itinerant singers from Yorkshire this week-end. Like John Crothers, he has been a delight to work with.

But is that it - eating, singing, the chance for some conversation and a bit of good craic? That wouldn't really be enough would it? No, we come as pilgrims and explorers, people who want to see some of the wonderful things that God has done (is doing and will do) in this place - partly to celebrate these things with you and partly to encourage us when we get back home. You will remember that some of you were kind enough to come to Bradford to share our 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary celebrations in 2005; we come this year to give thanks with you for the new political initiatives that herald a new start at Stormont. We started this link between the two St Martin's Churches as the Good Friday Agreement was being signed - and we are back with you at a time when many people would say that the dream of an integrated executive has finally come about. It's taken eight long years but here we still are, sticking with the relationship, able to give thanks to God for what some thought we would never see! And if I have a theme today it is connected with that idea - something to do with seeing, seeing with new eyes. That's the prism with which I want to look at today's readings, starting with the passage from 2 Samuel.

A brief mental recap will remind you that King David fancied the wife of Uriah the Hittite until he could think of nothing else. Sheer lust of course but that didn't stop him putting one of his most loyal lieutenants in the firing line so that he could have his wicked way with the newly widowed wife, the object of his desires. It was cynical beyond belief but David thought he could get away with it. Wasn't he the king: to whom was he accountable? Who would have the courage to stand up for the rights of a man whose wife caught the eye of the king? People would soon forget! Or would they? Via Nathan the prophet, God tells David in no uncertain terms that his behaviour is the key to all the misfortunes that will follow - not just the death of the child to come but also the break-up of the Kingdom. He might be a king, but David has the morals of an alley cat.

Morals: isn't it interesting how the word 'moral' has got some negative connotations in modern society! The tabloids in particular will sneer at those who appear to take the moral 'high-ground', suggesting by implication that moral positions are just too difficult to practice: that it is all very well to be moral but in business and indeed in much of 'real' life, you just can't afford to be moral. Life is about what's possible. Yet don't our morals hold the key to what kind of person we are? The trouble is - there are lots of different ways of being moral!

Let me set you a poser. You are in South America, and - well off the beaten track - you are being welcomed to this dead-beat little town as an honoured guest. When you arrive in the town square, you are welcomed by Pedro, the chief of police. He tells you that he has rounded up 20 people he thinks may be terrorists and he is about to shoot them all. But as you are an honoured guest, he invites you to select one of the 20 and if you shoot them yourself, he will release the other 19. What do you do?

Now our first instinct would be to say that we couldn't possibly shoot someone. Me, shoot a person dead; of course I couldn't.

*But then I think, but I would be saving the lives of 19 other people. Isn't it better that one person should die than 19? After all he has already told me that if I do nothing he will shoot all 20. Isn't it better to do the maximum good for the maximum number? But - if I take that line I will become a murderer too...*

Now this may seem like one of those silly puzzles for which there can be no right or wrong answer. You could choose either path and be able to justify it. But what would really matter was not whether you took up Pedro's invitation to shoot these innocent men or not but the reason why you chose to shoot or not to shoot. A truly moral person is someone who not only does the right thing but does it for the right reasons.

Because what all of us in the religious life have come to discover is that what we do only gives us true peace of mind if it can, in some very real way, be squared with the desire to be a person of good character, a person of consistent integrity. That is to say that doing bad things (even for the right reason) actually has the power to corrupt the inside of us. You see, even without God's punishment, what David did to Uriah ended up poisoning David's real self. He was a less good person from the minute he first laid eyes on Uriah's wife and cooked up the murder plan.

But I don't think David saw it like that. He wasn't thinking like that; in fact he wasn't thinking at all. He simply lurched from one bad decision to another, unaware of any fundamental principles - except what he wanted at just that moment. In the face of a Pedro-type story, he would have been completely at sea, trying to piece a solution together - aware of odd bits of experiences, odd rules about how to behave, but only half-aware of the old prejudices and assumptions that lay under the surface.

And we can be the same, making decisions about the future on the flimsiest of motives - just how we feel about something or even the last thing we happened to hear - good or bad. God can seem rather remote one day, and then we see him at work in someone the next - but we can't see the pattern of what's going on...

And what Jesus invites us to do in today's Gospel is to try to look at all our daily problems with transcendental eyes, to move up a gear, from the here and now into the realm of the things of God.

Do you remember those special glasses that they gave you in cinemas - the ones with green and red lenses so that the pictures became 3-D? Sadly they don't work with my eyes but I'm told that these images can frighten the living daylights out of you! But even I can let God give me transcendental eyes so that the modern world - with all its confusing signs and invitations to despair - is no longer just a threat and a disappointment but a place where, under the Cross of Jesus, it is fine to see things differently, to be both secure and confident on one side, but also totally vulnerable, powerless and wounded on the other.

Let me explain, using the Gospel story. Here is a woman who is loaded with guilt for all kinds of reasons. Yet she still has the courage to break open this flask of expensive oil in front of all these men. Where did she get that new found energy from? From an ability to know what she was about: to look at the world with a clear conviction of who she was and what was right: but also to carry an awareness that at any moment someone might try to get one over on her. So she could be joyful even as she was aware of her sins; even in her weakness she was being renewed. God was present and God was absent all at the same time; in the darkness there was an abundance of light. With those transcendental eyes the world was full of new possibilities; in the tension of confidence and fear she had the energy to kneel at Jesus' feet.

It doesn't take a genius to see that in both of our churches there is anxiety: what does the future hold? Have we had the good times? Is the future about working out how to put the lights off?!

Sadly in Bradford there can sometimes be a kind of unreality coming from the top; *we don't need all these clergy - they might even get in the way, stopping lay people from doing all the wonderful things that they want to do if only they were allowed.* Now I know this isn't true there or here. It isn't even the right question. What we need are those transcendental eyes.

For the Church of the future is not going to be made up of King Davids who can get what they want simply by demanding it; nor is it so hopelessly dysfunctional that nothing can be done. We are at a moment of decision: in fact, the whole Church of God is at a moment of decision. And the Pedro story asks us, what kind of people are we whom God has called to build his future kingdom? Are we those who will agree to do just enough to make things seem right or are we people who are willing to really wrestle with the issues that currently confront us, whatever the cost?

Put another way, can we use transcendental eyes to see that God is inviting us to be more concerned with changing ourselves than our structures? Can't we see that it is only when we are people of real virtue and integrity, that God can use us for his purposes because we have become our real selves? In other words, David was not being real when he stole Uriah's wife, he was being selfish; on the other hand the women with the flask was being real because it was unselfish love that made her do what she did.

It's a lovely idea: you and I are being our real selves when, with our transcendental specs on, we are looking at the world with both confidence that God can make all things new AND a realisation that our weaknesses are the only road that will get us where we need to be. In St Paul's words, *when I am weak then am I strong*. You see, the future of the Church is not about structures and plans and schemes (well only a little bit!); it is more about the quality of the person I am, the person you are. And when we stop pretending to be anything else than what we really are, then God can get a look in and start giving us new eyes to see the future, with openness as well as with hope.

God willing we will meet again, the Churches dedicated to St Martin in Belfast and Bradford, men and women energised by the Spirit, who know what we are about because we have made it our business to be truly alive and aware - neither sleep-walking into the future nor hiding behind the security of the past. This is a new world, an uncertain world and only those who have eyes to see, transcendental eyes, will get very far into that future.