

CELEBRATION OF READER MINISTRY 29th January 2011, Coventry Cathedral

The first thing I want to say to those to be admitted to the office of Reader is this. You have an impossible task. You need to know this. The second thing is that to recognise this impossibility and your incapacity – and mine - is to open the door to the grace of God which alone can make it possible. To recognise our incapacity and our limitation and at the same time to reach out to God in that knowledge gives God space to work in us and through us, to do a new thing and to make us new.

Jeremiah, called by God as a young man, and chosen by God before he was even born, could see immediately that he was not up to the task to which God was calling him. ‘*Lord God*’, he protests, ‘*truly I do not know how to speak, for I am only a boy*’. Echoes of Moses, when called by God to speak to the people of Israel, ‘*O Lord, I have never been eloquent, send someone else.*’ Reluctance, resistance to call are often precisely the sign that it is God calling.

Jeremiah was right, Moses was right, and you and I are right, and it is an insight from God, to recognise that we cannot do it in our own strength, or even with the greatest human wisdom or oratorical gifts. We have to learn, as Paul did that ‘*our sufficiency is not of ourselves but of God*’. Karl Barth captures this well when he writes: ‘*As ministers we must speak of God. As human beings we cannot speak of God. But in recognising both the obligation and our inability, we can give glory to God.*’

St Paul, the keenest of intellects and great master of religious argumentation, had to unlearn this expertise, to let go of the status that went with it and to shed the finest of religious pedigrees of which he had boasted. He had to learn as we have to learn, through our own unlearning, the language of Christ. First of all in silence. He needed to shut up, to stop indulging himself in the sound of his own voice and the brilliance of his own rhetoric. In the deserts of Arabia (an area in Syria which I have visited), he had to learn the language of silence. He had to learn to *be* with God, to listen to God before he could begin to stammer a new language, the language of Christ. As speakers for Christ, we too must first be listeners to Him. Saul the fluent and persuasive Pharisee of Pharisees becomes Paul the stammerer who speaks in ‘*weakness and fear and much trembling, not with wise and persuasive words*’. The religious pride of Saul has to be broken open, to be seen as ‘*so much rubbish*’ before the word of Christ and the wisdom of God can be heard through the foolishness of Paul’s preaching. It is through the afflicted, persecuted, struck down Paul that God’s word is heard. The preacher Jowett observed ‘*I once saw the track of a bleeding hare across the snow: that was Paul’s track across Europe*’. I think of Jacob, wrestling with God who then bears the scars of that wrestling with that injured hip. He limps. The limp, the wound of his wrestling, far from obscuring God’s life in him, actually authenticates it. This wrestling or struggling with God becomes the mark of God’s people, even the name of God’s people, *Isra –el*. There is something about wrestling with God, or being broken by God to be remade which is for all of us. As we read in Hosea on Thursday, ‘*Come let us return to the Lord; for it is he who has torn, and he will heal us.*’ We cannot minister simply as ourselves, but only as Christ lives in us. Christ can only enter, when the armour of our self-sufficiency has been broken open. This, as disciples and as ministers of the Word, we need to discover again and again.

In the much-nominated recent film *The King’s Speech*, we glimpse perhaps an echo of this. King George VI, afflicted by a dreadful stammer, comes to the throne, unprepared, but is passionate even with this affliction to do his very best. There is something, in the film at least, about his speech to the whole country at war, which is even more powerful, rallying and uniting than it would have been had he been fluent and never had to struggle with his speech.

But the Gospel, as Paul reminds us, is not of human origin. It is revelation from God, it is revelation of God. But how we try to domesticate the Gospel, to bend it to our ways and our thoughts! As Schleiermacher put it: ‘*God made humanity in His own image, but everywhere humans are making God in their image.*’ In a world which is so hungry and so needful of the Word of God, not your thoughts or my thoughts, how do we avoid this trap, to which all of us are prone? How can we escape the temptation

of moulding the Word of God to our own theological predispositions and prejudice? C.S. Lewis, in one of his last writings, *'An Experiment in Criticism'*, distinguishes between two ways of reading. The first, he calls, *using*. This is a kind of 'consumer' approach which is when we use the text to reinforce what we already believe, to strengthen our pre-existing arguments and prejudices; in short the human default mode of seeing what we want to see and hearing what we want to hear. (I remember going on retreat to Glasshampton some 20 years ago in a deeply exhausted state and reading the words on the wall *'Why seekest thou labour, thou wast born to rest?'* Words I really needed to hear. It wasn't until a year later on my next retreat, when I read them again, I saw that the actual words read *'Why seekest thou rest, thou wast born to labour?'*! ...the rather grim words of Aquinas I think.)

The second way of reading, Lewis posits, is *receiving*. This is approaching a text from the position that there is within it something that will be *gift* to me, something new. This '*receiving*' attitude to reading is based on knowing that there is more for us to learn and discover. There is more –in Scriptural terms – growing up into the stature of Christ, more growing in the knowledge of God, more growing in faith and hope and love for all of us to do. It is a kind of *hungry* reading. Only hungry and growing preachers can feed congregations hungry to grow. So the question for all of us, and most certainly for us as ministers of the Word, is 'how hungry are we actually to *'let ourselves be transformed by the renewing of our minds?'* And that means not just once so that our theological opinions become fixed for ever, but to go on letting ourselves be transformed by the renewal of our minds, constantly hungry for God's fresh word for us and His people today. *'To live is to change and to be perfect is to have changed often,'* as Newman wrote, *'from glory into glory'* as Paul writes. Today we celebrate this wonderful truth, the transforming of lives and the renewal of minds that God is doing among us. This is evidenced not simply among the new Readers responding to their call but in the large and growing number of people hungry to learn and to grow in discipleship.

Are we willing, do we want the Gospel of Jesus Christ to change us and go on changing us? Or do we prefer the comfort of settlement, of staying where we are and what we are? (If we are honest we might have to admit with Auden that *'We would rather be ruined than changed/ We would rather die in our dread/than climb the cross of the moment and see our illusions die.'*) To say 'Yes' to God's call is to say 'Yes' to adventure, to danger even. It is to resist the temptation of comfortable religion. William Stringfellow, the American theologian whom Karl Barth in his visit to America in 1962 described as *'the one theologian America should be listening to'* distinguishes between a *'biblical'* person and a *'religious'* person. A *religious* person knows the words and habits that satisfy the demands of religion and becomes comfortable in his or her religion. A *biblical* person is one who finds him or her self in the spotlight of God's attention who knows him/her self called to obedience and an ever transforming life. This is the fearful precarious territory we are to inhabit into which God speaks His Word, *'I have called you by name. You are mine.'* *'Fear not, trust me. Follow me'*

This Word is for the world, beyond the visible Church. I sometimes fear that almost all our God-talk and faith sharing is expressed among ourselves within the walls of the Church. But our faith and obedience is vindicated by who we are, by what we do and what we say 'out there'. There are so many signs of God's kingdom breaking in and we will see them when we recognise the opportunities God is giving us through the encounters we have outside of the visible church. The number of adults coming to confirmation, who trace the start of their journey to faith to a conversation in the work-place, at the school gate, in the shop, in the pub or wherever is but one sign of this. God is building His Kingdom and will build His Kingdom through lives handed over to Him, through the stammering, the limping, through all of us who know our need who take risks for His sake. God will richly bless and use for His glory all that you offer to him, transforming the water of our lives into the new wine of His Kingdom. *The One who has called you is faithful and will do it.*

+John Stroyan