

Sermon *Jesus College Oxford. 16/11/2014*
Psalm 26; Exodus 3:1-15; Matthew 16:21-end
Faith: a matter of life or sacrifice?

Three clergy were once on pilgrimage in Galilee, an Anglican, a Roman Catholic and a Methodist. As they looked out over the Sea of Galilee they agreed they needed more faith. So, to grow his faith, the Anglican priest set off, walking over the water. He returned breathless but exhilarated. The Roman Catholic priest went next, and the same thing happened. He walked off bravely and came back rejoicing. So the Methodist minister set off, not to be outdone, but he sank immediately and came up spluttering. The Roman Catholic turned to the Anglican and said, 'Shouldn't we have told him about the stepping stones?' To which the Anglican replied, 'What stepping stones?'

As Bishop John said when he told that joke at his farewell service, it's really from an earlier time in interdenominational relations. But what do we think we need faith for? Walking on water might come in handy occasionally, but it's not something we'll use every day. We probably have huge expectations of what having faith might mean for our lives, the way we live, how faith connects with the cutting edge of reality. We might be slightly suspicious that faith is about giving stuff up, especially fun, and it doesn't help that as we approach Advent it means we have to think about the final judgement and accounting for ourselves before God. Is faith about finding ourselves, doing amazing things, changing the world, believing in a God who can? Or is it about giving everything up, sacrificing everything, even ourselves? How do we really 'get a life'?

We can't really say by any stretch of the imagination that Moses had an ordinary life. Not many babies start their lives floating down the river in a basket, and growing up in a royal palace. Add to that the fact that he committed murder, ran away, and lived the life of a shepherd and you already have an extraordinary person, and he hadn't by this time even met God. If he thought he'd already had a life, he was in for a bit of a shock. Everything changes when he meets God in the burning bush, the whole focus of his life changes, from being a shepherd with a life, a living and a family, to being the leader of God's people, wonder worker, liberator and law giver. He was pretty reluctant though; God had to use snakes and leprosy to persuade him to go back to Egypt and start a whole new life, not so much for himself but for God's people. Not surprisingly, Moses found a whole new faith after that, and completely changed focus for his life. Certainly it involved sacrifice on his part,

and he never got to the promised land. But he met God face to face, and is forever counted as God's friend.

In the gospel reading from Matthew, there is a definite change of focus, and it's one that turns our thinking upside down. Jesus has been preaching, teaching, healing, the miracles have been coming thick and fast, he's drawn a huge crowd and a faithful band of committed followers. You can almost sense the excitement in the air, and the expectation that the time has come for God to deliver his people from the oppressive regime ruling their country. This was the time, this was the man, let's go to Jerusalem and do this! As if to crown this expectation, Peter has just answered Jesus' question: 'who do you say that I am?' 'You are the Messiah, the Son of the Living God'. And for this, Peter becomes the rock on which the church is built, and is given the keys to the kingdom. What an affirmation, both for Jesus and Peter. What a moment to bring in the new Kingdom!

And then, in a heartbeat, it all changes. 'From that time on', Matthew tells us, 'Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and undergo great suffering, and be killed'. It's the first of four predictions that Jesus makes about how his mission will really end. He has deliberately changed the focus from 'Jesus is Messiah', to 'Jesus will suffer and be killed'. And Peter, impetuous Peter, with his new found rock-like status and authority, who knows who Jesus is and had a specific narrative in his head about how this would all work out, suddenly finds his man going completely off script. 'God forbid it, Lord! this must never happen to you!' God forbid?! Are you kidding?! It's God's idea, and Peter just doesn't get it. 'You are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things'. But then, maybe Peter is so horrified by what Jesus has said that he's missed the end of Jesus' sentence, that he would be killed, 'and on the third day be raised'. Or maybe the whole idea of being raised from death was too far beyond human understanding. We can hardly blame him. But from this point on, the focus changes. Jesus is not, after all, simply offering good morals, a fine ethical system by which to live, and a treasure-trove of stories to help ponder the mysteries of life. And he is not offering to throw the oppressor out either, at least not by any means we understand.

What Jesus does offer, if we join him, is suffering, death and new life. It's not a manifesto designed to get people flocking to sign up. But, paradoxically, it is exactly what the world needs. God suffering with us, working to transform death into life, despair into hope, oppression into freedom. It's what the cradle and the cross are for, and why they are such powerful stories and symbols. Jesus takes as his logo the killing tool of the world's superpower of the time,

and makes it the threshold to life. 'Take up your cross and follow me.' But it can, and has been, so easily misunderstood. It's not a call to arms, but a call to sacrifice. 'If you want to save your life, you'll lose it, those who lose their lives for my sake, will find it.' This is a far cry from simply living a good life. But it is what we called to do.

The sea of red poppies at the Tower of London has been a highly powerful reminder of the immense sacrifice made by so many on all sides in the First World War, both in the trenches and at home, and how it changed a whole way of life, the way people thought and acted. 'From that time on', to echo Jesus' words, there was suffering, and hardship, sacrifice and death. Nothing was ever the same again. A few months ago, we were all encouraged to plant poppies in our churchyards, in gardens and schools and other public places. I was reminded of the story of the poppy, and how it came to be used as the symbol for remembrance. It's one of the few flowers that thrives in conditions of disturbed earth. After the fields of Northern France and Flanders had been so thoroughly disturbed and carved up by the violence of war, the poppy was the only flower that grew on the otherwise barren battlefields. Poppies thrive in disturbed earth. I planted some in a nice patch of well prepared soil. No signs of life at all. A couple of months ago I noticed a host of poppies growing all down the side of the A44 in Yarnton. No one planted them, but there they are. Bishop Colin told me how that bit of ground had been dug up for pipe work. Disturbed earth, giving up its secret seeds of life. Poignant reminders of the First World War. In the disturbed earth of our lives, where we find the Cross streaked with the red of sacrifice, beauty and life are made possible.

Oxford Diocese held a clergy conference back in March, and the special guest was Bishop Victoria Matthews from Christchurch New Zealand. She told us a story about a church she used to serve in some years ago. There had been a huge problem with the roof, and everything in the church had to be removed, and cleaned or replaced. They took away the hangings behind the altar, and discovered an ugly, concrete wall. It needed something to beautify it, while the work went on to repair and restore the church. A friend of Bishop Victoria's had made a crucifix which he was willing to lend them. It was made of bits of fractured, reflective glass, that reflected the light from the windows in different ways, depending on the time of day. In the morning, you could see your own image in the cross, yourself, fractured like the glass, to become part of the crucifix with Christ. In the evening, the light shone from the opposite direction, as though from the figure of Christ on the cross, the light, colours and shapes playing over those gathered before it. People found it incredibly moving; each person, whoever they were, and whatever their suffering, found

themselves included with Christ on the Cross and changed by that experience. Bishop Victoria ended by saying that the message of Christ on the cross is essentially this: 'Behold who you are, become what you see'. She said that was especially true of the Eucharist, as we behold the body and blood of Christ, and make our communion with Him: 'Behold who you are, become what you see'.

Whoever we are, wherever we are along the paths of life and faith, whether we are lost, found, fractured, whole, or somewhere in between, we are included in Christ's offering of himself, included in his sacrifice. We watch and wait, and pray and reflect, on the suffering of the world that we see in Christ crucified. And we will have our own sacrifices to make. But we never stop looking for glimmers of resurrection, never stop hoping for transformation and life. Jesus didn't stop with the word 'killed'; it was always about being 'raised'. This is the place where faith germinates, our minds and hearts refocused, to match Christ's, where we behold who we are, and become what we see. This is the place where life begins. Amen.