

Sunday 19th January 2015, 5.45pm Choral Evensong

Isaiah 52.13-53.12

Romans 8.31b-39

Cross Purposes

In nomine...

My husband is easily confused – never more so than when he was working in Montreal for three months, and found that Francophones were constantly responding to him with the word ‘Why’ in English. Innocently asking, in French, for a ticket for the Metro, he got the answer ‘why?’ ‘Double espresso please.’ ‘Why?’ Likewise, ‘can I have a beer, was greeted with the word ‘Why?’ – particularly distressing for Adrian, for whom denying beer when he’s desperate is an act of cruelty without parallel in contemporary behavioural psychology.

He soon discovered, to his equal annoyance and fascination, that in Quebec, the word ‘Oui’ is pronounced ‘Why’, rather as you and I might be tempted, were we to be educated on the opposite side of the Turl, to say ‘Yeah’ or ‘Yup’ or, bewilderingly, ‘Sick’.

Type the word ‘Why’ into Google and it makes three suggestions. Evidently we are to accept that the three most popular questions on that particular search engine are 1. Why is the sky blue? 2. Why do cats purr? And 3. Why am I always so tired? (to which the answer presumably is ‘I spend too much time asking Google inane questions’).

I’ve got a better question. Why Cross Talk this term? And why Cross Purposes tonight? Why? Why the Cross?

Reminding ourselves that we are a Welsh college is always good, so tonight’s readings have sheep in them. Because here at Jesus we like sheep. And “all we like sheep... have gone astray”. That’s what Isaiah says. And George Frederick Handel agreed, so he wrote a movement of his oratorio *The Messiah* all about it, much to the annoyance of his librettist, Charles Jennens, who thought that the repeated refrain

'All we like sheep' sounded like an expression of preference for meat with mint sauce rather than a biblical quotation.

But seriously, we have gone astray. Right off the rails. Even you and me. And our parents, our ancestors, even the saints who have gone way before us. We have all gone astray. In what way? I hear you ask. Have you ever pushed past someone in a Tube station or on a pavement? Have you ever felt so angry at someone that you've just wanted to be shirty, stroppy, or scream at them? Have you ever tried – consciously or unconsciously – to manipulate someone, to get your own way? Have you, in short, simply put yourself at the centre of the universe?

We all have. We may have thought we had good reason for it at the time, it may even have seemed to be the only way forward. And that's because my going astray is connected to the wider going astray of the whole world. We collude with a selfish society often without noticing. We collude with a selfish world without realising it. Sometimes we can be confused as to what really is the right thing or the wrong thing to do. And after all, when we all go astray, it's less noticeable to us all. We're just going with the flow. Each of us has turned to our own way.

But why shouldn't we? What's wrong with a world where we put ourselves first? Well, that turns into a world where we take other people's land, property, or have no qualms about taking someone else's long term partner... a world where we hurt other people without stopping to think about it. Or even we go so far as to think about it first, and then intend to wound our neighbours. That turns into a world of war, greed, heartlessness. And we need to try again and again to avoid hurting one another, and being hurt. We need to avoid going astray, avoid turning to our own ways.

But we can't do that by ourselves. And that's why something needed to be done about it. Something that's beyond my power, beyond your power. Something - extraordinary.

Extraordinary – like the birth of Jesus, yes possibly. But the death of Jesus, yes, definitely. And more than just his death, but his death on a cross. Something was needed, yes. But “why the Cross?” Why something so gory, such unadulterated cruelty, such unapologetic suffering? Why should God have to do that to his own Son? What kind of a God does that?

Let me tell you about our friend Nathan. He has just adopted two little boys. Brothers who have passed through social services, through a whole host of families. They've faced more troubles in their few years than many of us will face in a decade or more. Right now, I think they feel like they've just gone to heaven. Our friend is fabulous with them.

We went to a session led by his adoption charity, where his social worker spoke to us a bit about the background of children taken into care, and a bit about the kind of behaviours they might exhibit as they went through the whole process of learning afresh how to be loved. Not an easy journey for them – and not an easy journey for their adoptive father and his friends and local community. Everyone learning afresh a new kind of unconditional love.

This prompted me to think. Imagine a dad with his young sons. They too have questions as they grow older.

“Daddy”, says one, “would you ever stop loving me?”

“Of course not,” their father replies. An easy answer. They push him a bit more.

“But what if I drew on my bedroom wall?” asks the younger one.

“Well, I would be cross, and I might have to paint over it. But we would soon move on, you'd learn, and I would forgive you.”

“OK,” says the older one. “What if I got sent home from school one day for being naughty?”

“Well, we'd have to talk about what you'd done wrong, and figure out how to make it up,” says dad.

“But what about if he did it again?” asks little brother.

“We'd have to talk more about it. I'd be sad, and we'd need him to say sorry, and mean it.”

“But...” says the older brother, “what if I did something really bad?”

“Like what?” says dad.

“Like... shooting your best friend with my new Nerf gun?” says the younger brother. Dad laughs. “Well, that wouldn't harm him! Now, a real gun, that would be different...”

“So if I shot him with a real gun, would you stop loving us then?” asks the older brother.

“I would be really, really sad,” says Dad. “We might have to work hard at being good friends again. But I would do it, because I won’t stop loving you.”

Little brother: “What about hitting you so hard you had to go to the doctors?”

“Well,” says dad, “I’d be hurt. And I might not be able to do everything you like me to do, not until I got better. But I would get better, and I would still look after you.”

Now the older brother thinks he’s got it.

“But if I *killed* you, then you couldn’t love us any more. That would stop you loving us.”

Silence. Dad reaches out to them both. “My dear children, nothing, not disobedience, not wounds, *not even death* will stop me loving you.”

Like the sons who need to test out the love they receive, we are always testing God’s love. The Cross was a way of testing it to the utmost. And like the father whose love will never run out, God’s love goes beyond even the severest test Jesus’ historical first century Roman context can dream up. Or, as St. Paul puts it, “Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword?... I am convinced that neither death nor life, nor angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, *will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.*”

Why the Cross? It was the worst thing humanity-gone-astray could manage for Jesus, the Son of God. And even that couldn’t stop God loving us. Even that couldn’t quench the life that God gives.

Archbishop Rowan Williams says

Jesus crucified is God crucified – so we believe.¹

I hope that our sermons this term will help us to respond to that statement with real imagination, and real faith. Not like sheep gone astray, but like those lazy Quebecois we began with this evening, who can’t quite be bothered to get their pronunciation right.

What? No. WHY.

¹ Rowan Williams, *Open to Judgement*, DLT 1994, p. 61