

‘Back to Church Sunday’ (15th after Pentecost): CCSY, 13 September 2009

Wisdom 7:26-8:1; James 2:18-26; Mark 8:27-38

Welcome to Christ Church; and thank you to those who have responded to an invitation to worship here for the first time, or for the first time in a while. There are many good reasons for coming to church, and for not coming to church. In an episode of *The Simpsons*, Homer, having split his pants getting dressed one Sunday morning, elects not to go to church with his family – after all, God is everywhere, or, as Homer puts it, ‘omnivorous’ – and he proceeds to have one of the best days of his life, until he dozes off smoking a cigar on the couch, setting it alight, and decides it’s probably safer to snooze during one of Reverend Lovejoy’s sermons!

If you’re a Collingwood supporter, you may have come to offer thanks for miraculous deliverance! I can’t quite picture the local cultural equivalent, but at Notre Dame University in the United States, an outer wall of the library facing the football stadium is covered with a giant mural, referred to locally as ‘Touchdown Jesus’, because the Christ figure has his arms raised as though signalling a touchdown. As Laurence Moore explains in his recent analysis of the sacred and the secular in American society,

No one [is suggesting] the mural was placed where it is to help Notre Dame win football games . . . But . . . thousands of . . . fans . . . [have] looked affectionately toward the library whenever a home game was going Notre Dame’s way.¹

Our readings today have not been hand-picked for this occasion, but are given to us to ponder on in company with the wider church: an expression of our ‘catholicity’, which is a churchy word for ‘inclusivity’. And, at first take, the exchange between Jesus and Peter in our gospel passage makes me uncomfortable. It reminds me of a “‘Touchdown Jesus’ religion’: one based on claiming divine favour by using the right words, believing the right things, making the right plays; a series of unassailable answers to someone else’s questions; in short, the religion of my childhood – yours too, perhaps – from which I needed some space in order to find my own way back to church.

In that circuitous journey, it became increasingly clear that what I believe is relatively unimportant, for two reasons that today’s readings shed light on.

First, Peter’s confession of Jesus as ‘Messiah’ – the one anointed by God to announce and inaugurate the peaceable kingdom: God’s rule of love, mercy, and justice – Peter’s confession of this is not an act of individual intellectual assent, or even of personal faith commitment. In Mark’s narrative Peter represents the faltering, emerging, and constantly re-contextualised faith of the church: the household of faith, the believing community, wherein belonging and believing – like faith and works – go together, in no particular order.

Second, the possibility of friendship with God, to which our first two readings allude, is not so much a function of what we, then, believe about God, as what God believes about us.

The writer of our first reading personifies Wisdom, describing her as an unbidden divine visitor, who makes of those who will receive the gift of her presence, friends of God.

And in our second reading the Apostle James takes up his debate with St Paul – both of whom invoke father Abraham to demonstrate the priority of faith, or works, as the case may be.

¹ *Touchdown Jesus: The Mixing of Sacred and Secular in American History* (Louisville, Ky: Westminster John Knox, 2003), 11.

As far as we know, Abraham is minding his own business in Haran when God calls him to get up and go from his forbears' house and country to a new land, yet to be revealed. Inconveniently, his and Sarah's full-square response to that summons won't fit neatly into either of the round holes that James or Paul peg it for in their respective theological discourses. They just get up and go, and ask questions, and take risks; and, in offering hospitality to strangers, encounters God who won't let them be less than what, in that One's friendship, they already are.

Rahab, introduced into argument by James, plays an integral, if unlikely, role in the arrival of Abraham and Sarah's descendents to their promised, if already occupied, land. As the story goes, Joshua, poised to carry Israel over the threshold, sends two spies to reconnoitre the enemy camp. Lo and behold, these two young men happen upon the home of Rahab, a prostitute, where they spent the night engaged in . . . serious espionage. Their questions at the city gate about where they might find someone who could provide information, amongst other services, must have led the local intelligence to her front door. Rahab, with practised naivety, plays dumb, hides the spies, and after negotiating safe passage for herself and her family to the winning side in the ensuing battle, lets the two red-faced 007s down by a rope through the window of her house, located within the city wall itself – a marginal location in every sense.

As with Abraham, Rahab's actions are interpreted by the wider tradition as being faithful; but we have very little insight into what either of them held to be true. If anything, their stories suggest that they were by turn sceptical and pragmatic.

Yet both of these peripheral figures are gathered into the household whose waters of faith and works, belonging and believing, are so muddled. This aged, itinerant Aramean with serious family problems, and a ritually unclean Canaanite woman, who could hardly be more 'other' – more outside – if she tried, find themselves drawn into the story of God's people, made friends of God, that is, in New Testament language, 'justified', reconciled – not because of who they say God is, but because of who God declares them to be in that blessed, flawed company.

And so it is for us, bound together by the waters of baptism, which are thicker than any bloodline. We are given to each other as fellow travellers, and it is in this company that we are met by the counter-intuitive wisdom of losing our lives in order 'save' (that is, 'really live') them – discerning together what needs to die in us, and in our culture, so that we may not forfeit life, which can be our only shame (see Mark 8:38).

This church, as part of the Church Catholic, has always valued worship that brings glory to God: *Laus Deo*. And according to second-century bishop of Lyons, Ireneaus, the glory of God is the human being fully alive.

And so we come to church – on this, or any given week – amongst other reasons, in order to join together at this table to see, taste, touch, and smell the friendship of God, and to so hear who God says we are, and might become.

Come, O Justice, come, O Peace: come and shape our hearts anew;
come and make oppression cease: bring us all to life in you.²

Richard Treloar

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From the first hymn at 10.00am, *Together in Song*, 181.