

Sermon Notes

St Mark's Anglican Church
South Hurstville

Easter Day
8 April 2007

Preacher
The Reverend Chris Albany
Rector

Readings: Isaiah 65.17-25; The Easter Anthems; Acts 10.34-43; Luke 24.1-12

Don't be afraid

I am grateful to Rowan Williams, Archbishop of Canterbury for the bringing together in his *Christ on Trial* of two stories with which I want to begin today. The first is from the chapter in Dostoyevsky's *The brothers Karamazov* entitled "the Grand Inquisitor" in which Christ is on trial. This is the climax of the argument in book five of the novel between the radical Ivan and his younger brother Alyosha, a monastic novice – an argument not so much about whether God exists as about whether belief in God is morally defensible in the light of innocent suffering especially the sufferings of abused and tortured children. The ending of this trial scene is probably its most famous moment. The inquisitor waits for a response. "The old man would have liked Jesus to say something, however bitter and terrible. But he suddenly approached the old man and kissed him gently on his bloodless aged lips." The inquisitor flings open the door and tells his prisoner to go and never return. "What happens to him?" asks Alyosha and Ivan replies, "the kiss glows in his heart, but the old man sticks to his ideas." When Ivan at the end of the final outburst, concludes by saying that Alyosha is bound to repudiate him, his younger brother echoes the prisoner in the story and wordlessly kisses him. (quoted in *Christ on Trial* Rowan Williams; Fount Books 2000, p 123).

At one level I take Dostoyevsky to be saying that the world cannot be justified and its creator cannot be defended but that nevertheless it is held in a loving embrace. The kiss expresses a radical valuation of humanity, dependent upon nothing but love, denying nothing of the raw reality that is life. And that in this lays the key to living meaningfully in the world without despair.

The second scene is from Mikhail Bulgakov's novel *The Master and Margarita*. Bulgakov has picked up the medieval legend that Pontius Pilate haunts one of the Alpine peaks and gives it a poignant new turn. Pilate sits forever on his mountaintop, alone with his dog, sleeping, except when the moon is full (as it was at the Passover). He talks to himself, saying always:

"One and the same thing...that even the moon gives him no peace, and that his is a bad job. That is always what he says when he is not asleep, and when he sleeps, he dreams one and the same thing: there is a patch of moonlight, and he wants to walk down it and talk with the prisoner Ha-Nozri, because, as he insists, he never finished what he was saying that time, long ago on the 14th day of the spring month of Nisan. Margarita, the novelist's mistress, who has bargained and pleaded with the devil for more than one desperate soul during her bizarre encounters with the supernatural forces at work in the action of the novel now begs for Pilate's release only to receive from Satan the answer, "You don't need to ask for him, Margarita because the one he so yearns to talk with has already asked for him." So the master cries to Pilate "you're free your free he's waiting for you." A moonlight path opens up, and dog and man run down it to start once again the all-important conversation which had been interrupted by the moment of judgment and betrayal." (from *Christ on Trial*, p 130,131)

The Christian gospel tells us not simply that we are saved from sin or that our guilt is taken away – it insists that we shall find out who we are and what we may be in an encounter, a relationship. All human identity is constructed through conversations, in one way and another. The Gospel adds the news that, in order to find the pivot of our identity as human beings, there is one inescapable

encounter, one all important conversation into which we must be drawn. This is not just the encounter with God, in a general sense, but the encounter with God made vulnerable, God confronting the systems and exclusions of the human world within that world – that is, encounter with the incarnate God, Jesus the Christ.

The Gospels, the history of the church, the imaginative constructions of novelists like Dostoyevsky and Bulgakov, all give us a picture of the variety of stratagems we use to avoid that conversation, and of the cost of such avoidance. It is the cost of losing our very own self.

Rowan Williams in *Christ on Trial* says the hardest thing in the world is to be where and who we are. To learn to be at home with the reality of life as it is. “To be at home” says Williams, is not to be taken as meaning that we can feel ultimately satisfied with where and what we are, longing to hold onto it and unwilling to respond to challenge; we are not to settle down in our place and our time because we feel comfortable. There are always questions to be asked by us and of us. That said, however, what is asked of us is a commitment to the here and now - our questioning can never be an attempt to deny or escape the present moment. To know this moment, this place, this body, this set of memories, this situation, for what it truly is and accept this as reality, the reality with which God at each new instant begins to work: this is the “being at home” we have to learn. (see Chapter 4 of *Christ on Trial*)

Williams reminds us that this applies on many levels – individual and corporate. We long for the church to be more truly itself, and for me this involves changing its stance on war, sex, authority, the nature of the Bible and how we read it and many other difficult matters. We may believe in all conscience that our questions and our disagreements are all of God. Yet we must also learn to live in and attend to the reality of the church as it is, to do the prosaic things that can be and must be done now and to work at our relations now with the people who will not listen to us or those like us – because what God asks of us is not to live in the ideal future but to live with honesty and attentiveness in the present, i.e., to be at home.

Williams challenges us with the question, what if the project in question is oneself, and not the church or some larger social question such as war or poverty or climate change? At the end of the day, self is the central concern for most of us. We long to change and to grow, and we are rightly suspicious of those who are pleased with the way they are and cannot seem to conceive of changing any further. Yet the torture of trying to push away and overcome what we currently are or have been, the bitter self-contempt of knowing what we lack, the postponement of joy and peace because we cannot love ourselves now-these are not the building blocks for effective change. We constantly try to start from somewhere other than where we are. I suspect this is what lies behind the often unrecognised but very real depression, which afflicts many of us in the middle years of life and beyond, and which subtly and unconsciously saps our energy and sense of joie de vivre. Consciously or unconsciously we struggle to come to terms with unfulfilled dreams, unresolved hurts, unrealised expectations. Truthful living involves being at home with ourselves, not complacently but patiently, recognising that what we are today, at this moment, is sufficiently loved and valued by God to be the material with which God will work, and that the longed for transformation will not come by refusing the love and the value that is simply there in the present moment (*Christ on Trial* Chapter 4)

Williams reminds us, “that one thing that is central to our encounter with Jesus is our willingness to be silent, to let his silence work upon us, and sense his gaze upon us. To pause and stand still long enough to allow ourselves to be known. Luke has left us one searing image of this, when he concludes his account of Peter’s betrayal, at the moment of the cock crowing, with the words, “the Lord turned and look straight at Peter, and Peter remembered” (Luke 22: 61).” (*Christ on Trial* p139) This communicates the vital awareness that here, in Jesus’ presence, we are seen before we

ourselves see. We had thought we were the ones doing things, asking, looking, probing. Suddenly it is someone else who is acting and we realise that we are the ones acted on, looked at, known. The Old Testament asks whether a human being can see God and live. This story, says Archbishop Rowan, poses for us another question: whether we can be seen by God and live?

We cannot, or rather, the 'we' or the 'I' with whom we are satisfied cannot be seen by God and live. In the end, we must yield ourselves up to the truth; put ourselves in the hands of the only power that can give life. This requires a trust we are not used to, a trust that comes into being only when we know and accept that we are loved. That at the centre of reality is the loving embrace of the God, who in the crucified and risen Christ comes and kisses us and all creation. Our response is made possible by the living truth of today's Gospel. He is not here; he has risen (he is free)... Matthew in his Gospel adds, "He is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him. (He's waiting for you). Don't be afraid!" Which translates for us into "You're free! He's waiting for you!"

Prayer: Jesus, give us the courage to let ourselves be known and judged by you, and the courage to be loved by you; and as you come to us, risen from the dead, help us to hear and respond when you say "don't be afraid." Amen.

Rowan Williams *Christ on Trial* p. 141