

Bible Studies

- Luke 4
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Bible study: Luke 4.16-30

At the heart of this biblical passage from Luke's Gospel is the word 'Today'. It stands there potentially as both a word of grace and word of judgement. It draws into itself both yesterday and tomorrow, the past and the future.

For our biblical studies in this consultation we have chosen some key passages from Luke-Acts. There are several reasons for the choice of these two books. First, in the Revised Common Lectionary, an international and ecumenical lectionary that is used in several parts of the Anglican Communion, this is the year of Luke. Beginning from Advent 2006 up to the season of Advent at the end of 2007 there will be a special focus on Luke's Gospel during the readings set for Holy Communion. But that is not the main reason for our selection. . It is the nature of Luke itself. Luke is different to the other Gospels – certainly Matthew and Mark. At one level the difference is obvious. It is that Luke has a sequel – the Book of Acts, which tells the story of the early Church. Certainly Acts, as we can tell from Luke's introduction to his correspondent Theophilus, was clearly written as a conscious sequel to Luke's Gospel. Equally I would suggest that while Luke was writing the Gospel which bears his name, such a sequel as Acts was, if I can put it like this, at least 'theologically' in his mind, and that this has affected the pattern of his writing of his Gospel. What difference does this make? I believe that the key issue is this: Mark certainly, and to a considerable extent Matthew too, conveys the sense that the period after the death and resurrection of Christ was a sort of waiting-room time, with peoples' eyes focused primarily on the imminent coming again of Jesus which would lead to ending of the world as we know it. That affected people's perceptions of their situation and how they behaved. For example Paul, who was writing at least his earlier letters when this 'waiting room' mentality was dominant among Christians, comments that 'the present form of this world is passing away', and uses this as a reason to recommend that it is preferable for members of the Christian community not to get married. (1 Corinthians 7.31-35)

However by the time Luke produced his Gospel such a way of thinking had begun to undergo a substantial shift. The delay in the parousia – the technical theological term for the coming again of Jesus Christ – meant that Christian theology found itself quite literally having to 'watch this space' – that space after Jesus' death and resurrection. No longer was it appropriate merely to regard this as a hiatus in which people simply looked longingly into the future. It became important to make sense of this period as a present reality. My own view that a substantial factor in this shift were the events that took place around 70AD, when a devastating war occurred between Jews and Romans, which resulted, among other things, in the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem. There had been considerable eschatological ferment in the years building up to this: much speculation among both Jews and Christians, encouraged perhaps by their respective reading of the Book of Daniel, as to whether this was going to be God's great climactic intervention in history which would draw all things to a close. But, as we know, that was not quite how things turned out: the world apparently continued and has been doing so for the almost 2000 years which have now elapsed since that date. There are clear hints therefore within both his Gospel and Acts that Luke was seeking to address the bewilderment and pain that resulted. For example the editorial comment in Luke 19.11 – one of the passages we have chosen for exploration later in this consultation – , 'He [Jesus] went on to tell a parable, because he was near Jerusalem, and because they supposed that the kingdom of God was to appear immediately' seems to be addressed quite directly to the readers of the Gospel in Luke's own day. Similarly the comment of Jesus at the moment of his Ascension in response to his disciples' question,

'Lord is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel', 'It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority.' (Acts 1.6-7) seems to be addressed not merely to Jesus' first disciples but also to fellow Christians who were Luke's contemporaries, 50 or 60 years later. That passage in Acts continues with Jesus' pledge, 'But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.' (Acts 1.8). This affirmation takes us to the heart of the way that Luke's theology is different – for he gives a real and concrete value to the time after the Resurrection, the time of the Church. No longer is it simply a time of impatient hanging around with an eye on a future winding up of the world as we know it. It is instead the time of the Spirit, and an ordained time for the mission and growth of the Church. And it is a time when the Church is going to have to engage with the world in which it finds itself, the political and social reality of the Roman Empire, and the hesitant and often hostile interplay the followers of the Way, later known as Christians, had with Judaism, both as a religious system, and in view of its specific ethnic roots. How can the early Christian community live out its faith, and explore its God-given destiny in these particular circumstances? These are questions and issues that Luke cannot duck, nor does he want to. They are also questions that seem to have significant similarities to the questions many of us face today, when, as Christians, we find ourselves required to engage with Islam. So when, as in this consultation, we are focusing on matters of Faith and Citizenship with our own Christian-Muslim context in mind Luke/Acts is an excellent place to start. For as well as the overt engagement with the state at several points in Acts – examples of which provide the raw material for some of our later Bible studies during these days – awareness of the need for such an engagement is an undercurrent which also runs through the Gospel itself, a particularly powerful example being Luke 19.1-44, the passage which we have chosen for our second Bible study.

Yet this is not the whole story – quite literally – as far as Luke is concerned. For just as Luke gives attention to the period of the Church – the time after the life of Christ – so too he also regards it important to take seriously the period of the Old Testament – the time before the birth of Christ. There are a number of ways this happens. The birth narratives, the first two chapters of Luke's Gospel, feel redolent with the language and thought of parts of the Old Testament, particularly texts such as the psalms. In Zechariah and Elizabeth, Simeon and Anna, and even the shepherds in the fields, we have a sense that we are meeting representatives of faithful Israel, who have waited long through a time of exile for the coming of Israel's Messiah. And at several key points in both the Gospel and Acts it is made clear that the Old Testament is a necessary precursor to understanding the New – while in turn the New Testament helps us to delve into and make sense at the deepest level of the traditions of Israel. Such is very clear, for example, in the response of the unknown Jesus to his companions on the Road to Emmaus. 'Then he said to them, Oh, how foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have declared. Then beginning with Moses and all the prophets he interpreted to them the things about himself in all the scriptures.' (Luke 24.25-27)

So for Luke one way of describing the time of Jesus – the time of the Gospel – is as 'the middle of time'. That is the literal translation of the German title of a classic book about Luke's Gospel by Hans Conzelmann, 'Die Mitte der Zeit'. Conzelmann suggests that Luke saw history as three ages; the age of Israel and the Old Testament, the age of the Gospel and the age of the early Church. But equally it is not true to suggest that Luke totally separated out each of these three ages from the other two: they overlap and inform each other. An excellent example of this occurs in relation to the story of Jesus' transfiguration. It cannot be understood apart from the similar experience undergone by Moses in the Old Testament (Exodus 34), and equally it illuminates what happens to Stephen whose face, according to Acts 6, at one point 'shines like the face of an angel'.

All this is a long way of saying that for Luke, history matters. And I think that is true in a way that is rather different from the other Gospel writers. The past is important for understanding the present – and both are important if we are to be guided into the future. And I feel this is an important observation to make in this consultation with its focus on Citizenship and Faith. Because I do think a proper understanding of Citizenship and a real sense of history actually belong together. It may not be particularly fashionable to say this at the moment but I believe that part of our task as citizens of our countries is to be willing to take seriously their history – both in its positive and negative aspects – for without a real understanding of history the present itself will quickly turn into a sort of intellectual froth or flotsam. I think I can perceive something of this in my own country of Britain today. I wonder what the situation is like in yours? One of the words that lies at the heart of biblical thinking about the past is 'remember'. Think of Exodus and Passover, Last Supper and Holy Communion. The word 'remember' is essential here. It is important to remember, for memory can bring hope. It is interesting that in English at least the word 'remember' can be linked to 'member', the different parts or people that make a group – or a consultation – or even the different limbs of our body. And just as we can talk about 'dis-membering' something – breaking it apart – so a number of commentators suggest that the act of 're-membering' constitutes pulling things together once again and making them whole. If this is the case then what is the relationship between remembering the past – and making our societies whole?

Some of these issues will be interesting topics for discussion in the groups shortly. How important is a real understanding of our political and social history to help us engage with our fellow citizens of 'other faiths' –

whether we Christians are in the majority – as in Britain, or in a minority situation as in some of the countries from which you come? What does the word ‘remembering’ mean for you?

One thing I have noted in my exploration of Luke-Acts is that what I call the keystone passages – which seem to be intended to give a structure to the two books – all appear to have a real sense of drawing on the past – to help interpret the present and the future – about them.

Briefly I would identify these passages as:

The account of Jesus’ presentation in the Temple – which we used as our Gospel Reading earlier today. As Bp Michael pointed in his meditation at lunchtime – in the Orthodox Church this is called the Feast of Meeting: it is where an old man and old woman meet a very young child, where the Old Testament meets the New, where the past informs the present and gives us a hint about the future.

The passage which is our current focus – this mission statement at the beginning of Jesus’ ministry. In both the quotation from Isaiah which is at the heart of the story – and the examples from Elijah and Elisha which Jesus then gives, we encounter Israel’s past – and the Old Testament. At the same time the passage is clearly intended to set out the programme for Jesus’ future ministry – and the ultimate reaction to his words foreshadows his own future fate.

There is the encounter with Jesus by the disciples on the Road to Emmaus. We have already noted how a key feature of this story is how those companions of Jesus learn that it is when they come to grips with and explore the past that the present seems very different, and that in turn it is only when this has happened that a new future can open up and begin to beckon. The road to Emmaus ultimately leads into the many journeys that will take place in the Book of Acts. There is a wonderful comment made by the Roman Catholic writer Maria Boulding. She says, ‘Those two travellers are you and I; they are the Church walking with Christ the long road of history.’

There are the words of Jesus which act as the programmatic start of the Book of Acts. Once again both past – the glimpse back to the glory of a political Israel – and the future – the widespread outreach of the Church across the world are drawn into the narrative.

And finally, at least for my purposes, though I expect one could think of other keystone passages too – there is the account of Paul’s conversion – particularly as it is retold by Paul himself. This will be the final biblical passage we explore towards the end of our time together. In language which at points almost seems to echo both the words of Simeon at the Presentation – and then the discussion on the road to Emmaus – Paul describes how he has both ‘said nothing but what the prophets and Moses said would take place’ and refers to God’s future vision for the salvation of the Gentiles which he Paul is called to help accomplish..

So past and present and future: I do believe that it is important both for our Christian self-identity and also for how we engage with others such as Muslims, to allow each of these three to commentate on and help to elucidate the others. And there is one respect in which this is so – which is particularly important in view of the theme of this consultation: Faith and Citizenship. Because if we take the three ages that Luke refers to – the age of Israel and the Old Testament, of Christ and the Gospel, of the early Church and the Book of Acts – we find that in each of the three we have (if I can put it like this) a different model of Faith and Citizenship being expressed. In the Old Testament, broadly speaking (though the period of the exile might be considered an exception) Faith and Citizenship were regarded as co-terminous – if you were an Israelite then the assumption was that you were a worshipper of Israel’s God – Yahweh. I think to a considerable extent it resembles the model that a number of Muslim countries seem to aspire to. Perhaps it is also a model that in the past some majority Christian countries have held. In the Gospel the situation was different: Jesus Christ himself was a member of a subjugated people – non-citizens but part of the Roman Empire and faith had to be worked out in this situation of apparent political and religious oppression. Once again there are possible parallels to be drawn from a number of current Christian and Muslim contexts. And finally there is the situation of the Book of Acts where he is seeking to work out a *modus vivendi* – way of living – as members, and in some cases as citizens of the Roman Empire, and yet aware that there was potentially an intrinsic hostility between Caesar and Christ. Two of our Bible study passages will be addressing specifically this ambiguous relationship between Rome and the early church. Yet again I can see a number of parallels in terms of the relations between Christians and Muslims in our world today. But what is also interesting about all this, it seems to me, is that if we think of Luke’s three stages of history as interweaving and reflecting each other then it means that somehow these three different models of political relating also can not be totally separated out from each other. You cannot simply say one is right and the others wrong. They don’t and can’t exist in isolation. Our call as Christians is to try and hold them together in a kind of tension – painful and difficult though that can sometimes be. But I believe that Jesus himself is a model for us in this – particularly as we meet him through the eyes of Luke. In this Gospel the story of Jesus’ passion and death overtly takes account of the political tensions of Jesus’ day between Jews and Romans. Luke does not provide us with any easy answers: he refuses to allow Jesus to be identified as either Zealot or collaborator – but equally he insists that Christ’s

suffering and death cannot be understood apart from such a political context. The Christ we meet in this Gospel will not withdraw into a holy and pietistic quietism. The 'exodos which he was to accomplish in Jerusalem' (Luke 9.31), was both an intensely political and worldly event (as indeed was the original biblical Exodus from Egypt), yet at the same time constitutes a refusal to play by the normal political rules of his day. Such a tension can be immensely costly to those who engage in it. It could in fact be said to have crucified Christ.

And since it is more than time that I turn in detail to the specific passage we are looking at this afternoon – I could also say that such a tension is already foreshadowed in this passage from Luke 4 – which of course almost ends in Jesus' death.

In the opening sentence of this talk I hinted at one of the key words in this passage 'Today'. I will return to it before I finish – but first I want to focus on another word that is significant within it: 'acceptable' – in Greek *dektos* – which both links the two halves of the story, the Bible reading and the aftermath today, and link both to the Old Testament.

There is a great solemnity about Jesus' reading of the scripture passage which comes from Isaiah. The very structure of the writing emphasises this: Jesus stands, receives the scroll, unrolls it, reads, rolls it up again, hands it back and then sits down. And in the middle – the focus point of such a structure – there is the actual reading. The reading is from the Book of Isaiah. That certainly can be said. But that is the point when the complexities start. At first sight it looks as though it is a straight reading from Isaiah 61.1-2. Yet there is one addition and one subtraction which means that the sum ends up being completely different.

The addition is the line 'to let the oppressed go free', at the end of Luke 4.18. If you look carefully at Isaiah 61.1-2 you will see that it simply isn't there. So where do these words actually come? The answer is another passage of Isaiah – 58.6 – a passage often used in Lent. God is speaking through the mouth of the prophet: 'Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke.' And it is interesting how the passage then continues, 'Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house, when you see the naked, to cover them, and not to hide yourself from your own kin.' Somehow by adding those few words 'to let the oppressed go free' into the speech in the synagogue Jesus and Luke have opened a gateway which encourages us to pull in the words which surround them to fill out God's vision of social justice for all people and become part of this mission statement at the beginning of Jesus' ministry.

And the subtraction? It is a missing line. Jesus' final words as he quotes from Isaiah are: 'To proclaim the accepting or acceptable year of the Lord' – a sentence with that word *dektos* in it. (Some translations put it 'to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour'.) But in Isaiah the message continues with the threatening line, 'and the day of vengeance of our God.' There is little doubt that Jesus and Luke deliberately omitted these. And in doing so Jesus changes the thrust of the Old Testament prophet that he is quoting from. It does indeed mean that, as his audience will approvingly remark in verse 22, he is speaking 'gracious words' – or as Luke quite literally puts it when you read the Greek, 'words of grace' – alluding surely to the theme of God's welcoming grace which underlies the whole passage. In the Greek the last word that Jesus quotes from Isaiah is actually *dektos* 'accepting' – that word which expresses at its heart God's generosity. Among other things which would be interesting to explore is what might this mean for the relationship between the Old Testament and the New.

Intriguingly the word *dektos* provides another link which strengthens that connection with Isaiah 58 which we were exploring a few minutes ago. For just before the line which is imported from it into Jesus' speech Isaiah 58.5 reflects, 'Is this a day acceptable to the Lord?' – with *dektos* making an appearance. But more importantly for our purpose *dektos* is also present as the story of Jesus that day in Nazareth develops. For just as the mood of the congregation begin to turn from approval into hostility, Jesus himself comments, 'Truly I tell you, no prophet is accepted / acceptable' – once again *dektos* – in his own home town.' And from that point on the hostility bubbles up into fury at Jesus as he sets about giving practical examples of God's accepting grace to those 'outside': firstly a Canaanite widow and then a Syrian army captain. The story captures therefore a wonderful and powerful irony – that it is precisely by offering God's accepting generosity – *dektos* – that Jesus makes himself unacceptable – again *dektos*. And the people that initially were pleased to listen to Jesus 'gracious words' turn hostile when he gives examples of God's grace in action.

What does this story mean for us in our contexts today? And for our understanding of Faith and Citizenship? When, if I might put it like this, the Muslim might take the place of the Canaanite widow or the Syrian army captain in our ongoing story? And in view of what I was saying previously, does it feel different to read it in different political contexts, if you are a powerful majority responding to outsiders who are a comparatively powerless minority, or instead you are small minority who feel either powerless or vulnerable confronted by an Islam that is increasing in both size and power? Indeed does it depend on our contexts whether we locate ourselves among the congregation in the synagogue or alongside Namaan the Syrian and the woman of Sidon? Or indeed somewhere else in the story?

But finally to refer once again to the word 'Today'. I began by saying at the heart of this biblical passage from Luke's Gospel is this word 'Today'.

One of my colleagues, Bishop Michael Doe, General Secretary of USPG, has noted that the word 'Today' appears at seven very significant points in Luke's Gospel. Moments such as the words of the angels to the shepherds, 'Today is born to you in the city of David, a Saviour who is Christ the Lord', or the words of Jesus himself as he responds to the invitation of Zaccheus, 'Today salvation has come to this house.' I could give you a list of all seven. Today is a word central to the Gospel – it is both a word of grace and a word of judgment, because it means that decisions have to be made now – to accept or to reject – to align oneself with the hospitable God or to rage at him –now! I suspect that for all too many of us, though we believe in the promises of God, the idea that they might happen today would be profoundly disturbing to us. And Luke's 'today' as I suggested in my opening remarks is particularly powerful, precisely because Luke takes history seriously, drawing into itself both yesterday and tomorrow, the past and the future. 'Today, this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing'.

Luke 19:1-10

Aim: To affirm that citizenship belongs to God, therefore God's Kingdom is for all.

Introduction

St. Luke has always been described by many biblical scholars as the most beautiful gospel ever written. The central theme is "Good-news of great joy to all people irrespective of race, culture, sex, language, and religious affiliation". The reason is that St. Luke's gospel contains beautiful teachings on joy, compassion, prayer, regard for women, sympathy for the poor and the universal aspects of Christianity which make it a world-wide faith. Considering the theme of this conference, the organisers have chosen the most appropriate books for our bible study sessions. This passage on the conversion of Zachaeus has a beautiful teaching on the universality of God's grace upon his creation. Christian and non- christians inclusive. As Jesus passed through the city of Jericho, a wealthy and very important town in the Jordan valley frequently referred to as the 'city of Palms', 'a divine region', 'the fattest in Palestine', he came across Zacchaeus. Zacchaeus was a tax collector and also described as a rich man but lack the inner joy. His profession did not make him popular especially among the tax evaders. He was despised and hated but his heart was after the love of God. His determination to see Jesus (expressed his willingness to be saved. The wisdom he used to climb the sycamore tree because of his small stature paved way for the actualisation of his dream. As a sinner, Jesus decided to be his guest which confirms that God's grace is for all who long for it. Even though this visit grieved the Jews because Jesus entered the house of a sinner, this proved that Christ's mission is a universal one. There is no Discrimination in the ministry of Jesus. A total change of heart came upon Zacchaeus. The grace of God is for all who come to him in full repentance. Repentance is what God demands from us, whatever your situation (Ez. 14:6; 18:30, Matt. 3:2; 17:4, Mark 1: 15). Salvation is for all who came to Jesus in penitence and faith.

Questions for discussion:

What does conversion experience entail? (Luke 19:8-10, cf. Acts 9:3-9; 10:34- End).

Why did Zacchaeus determine to see Jesus? (Luke 19:9, 42:25-40).

What is Jesus attitude to citizenship? (Luke 19:5, cf. Matt 28:19- 20; Mark 16: 15-18; Acts 2:39).

What are the steps to true conversion (Luke 19:8; Acts 2:38; 16:31).

Suggest ways by which the contemporary church can em back on ministry of reconciliation among non-christians.

Conclusion

Zacchaeus determined to see Jesus. His physical stature was to be a barrier. He did not allow this to stop him. His determination yielded positive results. We need to grow to full spiritual stature that will make us fellowship with God and enjoy His favour always. His dreams became released, so also those who seek Jesus will find him. Salvation is for all. The Kingdom of God is open to every race and all conditions of men. In conversion it is not a mere change of words of month which Jesus Christ demands, but a total change of life that can attract others into God's kingdom. Food for thought How do we relate practically with people of other faiths as Christians, especially in a more hostile situation?

Luke 19:11-27, cf. Matt. 25:14-30

Aim: That there is adequate reward for proper use of talents.

Introduction

The parable teaches that all human persons created by God are endowed with one talent or the other. In this context all the servants were given something to trade with in the absence of their master. On the return of their master, each had to give the account of what has happened to the talents given. The first, who traded with his, gained double and was adequately rewarded because he was faithful. Likewise the second. The third servant came grumbling, he had nothing to show like the other two instead condemned the master for craftiness and injustice. His reward was shame and sorrow. Therefore, the talent that was given to him was retrieved and given to the man who was productive.

This parable talks about the king's trust in his servants. He left them entirely to their devices. Here it teaches us that God is concerned with all his people and wants us to do something for him using the gift he has deposited in everyone. This episode also gives the king's test on each of the servants. God's trust in man is a test. Our life career is our mission field and it is a test whether that privilege he has given to us will be properly utilised.

The parable teaches us that there is reward for everything we do in our mission field (cf. Gal. 6:7, II Cor. 5:10; Rev. 22:12). The first two received commendation because they were not indolent but faithful and hardworking. That was why the master said that the talent given to the person who did not use his own should be taken from him and given to the person to those who will multiply it.

The reward of work well done is more work. The great reward of God to the man who has satisfied his test is more trust.

Discussion Questions

What was the instruction given to the servants by their master and why? (Luke 19:13; cf. Matt. 25:14).

What was the reward of those who multiplied their talent? (Luke 19:17, cf. Matt. 25:21- 23)

Why were they productive (Luke 19: 17, cf. Matt. 25:21-23)

To what extent can 'trust' be an instrument for evangelisation in the 21st century church?

How was the third servant judged? and what lessons can we derive from this action? (Luke 19:22-24, cf. Matt. 25:26-30).

Mention 5 different ways by which the church can make its members more productive through the use of their talents.

Conclusion

The parable concludes with one of the inexorable laws of life. "To him who has not, what he has will be taken away". This is very logical. Life is a gift to be useful to God and to humanity. Christian life demands steadfastness. Our practical christian life must be consistent. In the language of academicians 'stop publishing then perish', so also life that is not useful to God and the community is a life that is dead. All citizens of any given nation has one thing or the other to contribute to the growth of their community unless one decides otherwise.

Food for thought

Mission and ministry have been entrusted to the church by God, to what extent are we fulfilling this expectation in our relationship with non-christians?

Bible Study – Acts 10 ‘Peter’s encounter with God’s Truth in Cornelius’

The book of the Acts, contains stories of experiences of early Christians as they developed in their faith and understanding of their place in the wider context of Judaism and Roman (Gentile) Empire.

The fact that Christianity was born from Judaism bore implications of how Jewish Christians could relate to the people of other cultures & faiths, outside and Judaism – especially Gentiles.

Gentiles were regarded as unclean people by Jews, with whom the latter could not speak, touch, share anything or be together in one place.

Cornelius was a Gentile, a Roman army officer, and not a Jew, but a person who feared God, prayed and gave alms for poor people (Vs2 & 22).

One day, an angel appeared to him and asked him to send for Peter. About the same time Peter had a vision of animals, which the Jewish ceremonial law regarded as unclean. Naturally, Peter protested three times to eat of these animals, on account of their being unclean.

Peter's encounter with Cornelius reveals this deep problem that characterised the Christian-Gentiles relations in the early Church!

In fact, the Jerusalem Council, the first Christian court (incidentally presided over by Peter), was called to solve the problem regarding Gentile converts to Christianity (Acts 15).

Paul, who took up ministry among the Gentile after his conversion, struggled to make his fellow Christians understand God's purpose for Gentiles.

Paul even rebuked Peter for employing double standards towards Gentile Christians. Peter was eating with the Gentiles Christians from the same table, but stopped doing so as soon as his fellow Jewish Christians arrived (Galatians 2:11-14).

Although Acts 10 seems to portray Cornelius' conversion to the Christian faith as a central feature in the story, I see this encounter as a great moment of revelation for Peter, and indeed a moment of discovery for the Apostle and his Jewish Christian entourage!

This encounter taught Peter a lot of lessons about things he had previously been blind to. Through this encounter Peter learnt about himself, about other people (Gentiles) and more importantly (and especially so) about God, and God's mission in the world.

In encounters with others, we deal with newness of things: new people, new names, news languages & accents, new cultures, religions. So, we really deal with strangeness and difference.

Strangeness & difference are not a problem in themselves but it's how we deal with them, how we relate to them.

We all, each one of us, have our own prejudices & misconceptions about things, about places, about people, and even about God!

So, encounters can re-enforce our prejudices and misconceptions about others, in which case we miss the opportunity to learn, to hear things we have not heard, and we miss the opportunity to grow in our understanding of life and the mystery of God.

There is also a general fear in us human beings to encounter or engage others who are different from us, partly because we don't feel comfortable with unfamiliarity, the unknown territory; but also that opening up for an encounter means creating space for others, in our lives.

This creates all sorts of questions on how to relate to the other vis a vis the differences – culture, language, traditions, religion, and the expectations that may go with all that.

Three stories from Zambia:

There is a strong interfaith relationship in Zambia, particularly in the Capital City Lusaka, comprising the 4 main Church mother bodies, Hindus, Bahai Faith, and Islam. The umbrella body is called Zambia Interfaith Network Group Organisation (ZINGO). Members of ZINGO often have joint programmes in HIV/AIDS and also hold national prayers together – which mostly take place in the Anglican Cathedral.

Several Cathedral members are not happy to see members of other faiths coming to worship in the cathedral, in fact they have protested to the Dean or Provost, and to the Bishop, who himself until recently was the Dean of the cathedral and had officiated at such interfaith functions!

Early last year, a Muslim became a Christian in a parish in one of the Dioceses in Zambia. The parish was a kind of dilemma as most members did not know what to do with this man. It had never happened before so they were not sure how to support him. Some were not even sure if the man was sincere & genuine. He needed somewhere to stay as he was afraid of being lynched by muslim friends in the area.

I discovered that one of the challenges in interfaith encounter, from the context I come, (majority Christian) is how Christians can relate to people of other faith while maintaining the integrity of and the confidence in the Gospel – that is, while remaining faithful to the Gospel.

Another challenge is simply the attitude towards people of other faith – the “strangeness”, the difference between them & us, the unfamiliarity.

God’s mission, however, encounters strangeness – in the Gospels we see Jesus encounter with the strangeness, those society would otherwise have nothing to do with – women, the unclean (lepers), tax collectors, and of course, the Gentiles.

Deep and meaningful encounters are usually those that challenge our prejudices about others and indeed enrich us, and our understanding of others - otherness. Such meaningful encounters also teach us more than we already know about God and the Gospel truth.

One reality about being a Christian is that I keep learning of God’s truths in others, and from strange situations, even and especially those I least expect.

When you encounter others you encounter God, in whose image you and those you encounter were made, strange as they may appear or look, strange as their culture and religion may be.

Encounters often challenge our beliefs, perceptions and traditions we hold dear. We start re-discovering anew who God is & his mission purposes for us and for the world.

In fact in others, we get to know more about this God we worship and preach to others. In others, we hear the true meaning of the Gospel message and indeed God’s mission in his world.

In the case of Peter, he was a Jewish Christian, a very respected person among the apostles. He is also generally known as an impatient, impulsive and, of course a staunch follower of Jewish traditions and the Law of Moses.

As a result his traditions and culture, Peter could not allow himself to encounter or actively engage with the Gentiles, the unclean people!

But in our reading something significant is happening in Peter’s life and attitude towards the Gentiles – he is gradually changing, and I would say ‘he is “converting”’.

I dare say Peter was converting from:

Tribal or cultural prejudice - that Israel was a chosen tribe and therefore God had nothing to do with other tribes. But he discovered that Cornelius was actually a God fearing man, who prayed to God often, and did good things in the community he lived. He also discovered that God was the Father of all, including Gentiles. (vv15, 22, 43, 45-48).

Religious prejudice – that Jewish people did not talk, touch, or eat with unclean people, because they were not part of the true religion - citizens of God’s family. But Peter discovered that, God himself had spoken to Cornelius directly, and had called him to be one of his disciples, and that Peter himself was not capable to deny Cornelius and his family the baptism. (Vs22, 30-33, 47).

Peter learnt all this truth through this encounter with Cornelius, a Gentile army officer.

While preaching to Cornelius, Peter, as a matter of fact, was equally preaching to himself. Through this encounter and indeed the message he preached, Peter discovered the truths he had not known about God & God’s mission.

‘Then Peter began to speak to them: “I truly understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears God and does what is right is acceptable to him.” (Acts 10:34-35 NRSV)

It is not only Peter who experienced new realities and truths about God through this encounter but his whole entourage (of the Jewish Christians):

“While Peter was speaking, the Holy Spirit fell upon all who heard the word. The circumcised believers who had come with Peter were astounded that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on the Gentiles, for they heard them speaking in tongues and extolling God.” Vs44-46 (NRSV)

Well, this was a powerful encounter for the Christian Jews – an eye opener (as one would say) and a great revelation into the mysteries of God.

Most, if not all of us, I hope, believe that God works outside the Church as much as in the Church. God is simply God, who maintains his freedom to remain God, and even to give us surprises, as Peter and his group discovered.

This passage is a great reminder to me (and I hope to a lot of us here) that God respects all people, and especially those who fear him irrespective of their culture or religion, and therefore God expects us to treat them with respect and dignity.

Peter encountered a great surprise if not a shock of his life (though it was a wonderful shock!). He clearly realised that God (the Holy Spirit) was in-charge, and so he asks, "Can anyone withhold the water for baptising these people who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?" (Acts 10:47)

The prejudices, wrong attitudes and misconceptions had no base to stand on – they were simply crumbling to pieces. Hallelujah!!

Somehow the early Christians had forgotten the message of the early prophets that God chose Israel as an act of grace and not because they were favoured. (Amos 9:7) That Israel was to be a means of blessing for all nations (Acts 2:37-39; Romans 9-11).

For me this also shows one truth that 'Christians experience continuous conversion' as God reveals his purposes in new and ways that often surprise us, as the many Jewish followers of Jesus often found. We discover anew God's intentions and purposes for his world.

God's mission in his world is often bigger, wider, deeper, and higher than we can contain and fully appreciate at any one time!

Amen!

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Questions for Reflection

Acts 10: 1-48

There are many actors in the story, but who do you think is (are) the main actor(s) in the story, and why?

What is the implication in interfaith relations of the statement that "God works outside the Church as much as the in the Church"? (Acts 10: 2, 22, & 35).

What are some of our cultural or/and religious attitudes, beliefs and practices that can act as barriers for a meaningful encounter with people of different cultural, social, tribal, language and faith background? Why?

Peter had been a close disciple of Jesus and therefore must have experienced some of Jesus' examples of Jewish-Gentile relation in his ministry, and yet somehow he seems to have missed the point in Acts 10 (also cf. Acts 2:37-39). How is this possible for us today?

How do you understand God's citizenship from the following passages: Acts 10: 14-15, 34-35, 44-47; 11:17-18.

Acts 16:25- 40

Aim: To emphasise that conversion can take place anytime and in any human situation.

Introduction

The Acts of the Apostles have always been described by Christian theologians as Acts of the Holy Spirit. In essence, the book is full of mighty acts of God in the lives of his people. In it, the coming into being of the church in physical form precisely on the Pentecost day (Act 2) is described and also how the church spread in lips and bounds.

Acts of the apostles has also been described as 'the bridge' between the historical account of Jesus Christ's mission on earth as recorded in the gospels and the theological interpretation of this mission in the apostolic writings i.e. the Epistles. The book fulfils three major purposes:

It provides a chronicles of mighty and triumphant progress of the gospel ministry in the early church.

It provides a progressive summary of the origin of the church and its faith.

It presents an apologetic approach aimed at defending the christian community against charges which were popularly brought against it in the latter half of the first century.

The passage for our study, Acts 16:25-40 narrates the episode of the Philippian jailer and his eventual conversion. This story proves that conversion can come upon in any individual irrespective of his environment and his personal convictions. This event brought out three miracles that disturbed the citizens of Philippi.

In the realm of the spirit, there is the human spirit which is renewed and fortified by Christ which rises above the grim and painful experiences of the prisoners' cell and the instrument of torture which finds a song of praise to God (verse 25). This was a challenge to faith (Romans 8:25), a clarion call to victory (Rom. 5:17, II Cor. 2:14) and a spring board for witness (verse 25:6-7). Many in such a situation would cause their luck, renounced God and tried to bribe the jailer but Paul found that situation to glorified God and witness for him (Phil. 4:6-7).

(b)The earthquake came at the right time and for the required purpose. The purpose was to release the prisoners from their chains and to open the cell doors, but not to destroy lives as it is usually meant to be. The supernatural disturbance of the earthquake struck terror into the jailers' heart, giving, him a salutary fear and anxious concern for salvation (verse 30).

Terror betrays a bad conscience because of sin which cause disharmony with God. This event in the life of the jailer made him to pass from death to life (cf. Col. 1:13 & 14), also for his family, form the solitude of alienation and fear into the joyous family of God (verse 33 & 34). To God, nobody is an outcast in his kingdom. He provides every opportunity for people to come into this saving grace. No religion should be discriminated against. Efforts should be made by the church to open doors of grace to those outside the church. The Anglican Church should lead in this regard even at the global level.

We should take note here that Paul acted clearly within his civil rights and got what he demanded even to the full apology and regret. That they had blundered into beating and imprisoning Roman citizen whose case had not been investigated (verse 37). We should take note here that God has endowed every citizens with certain human rights that has to be respected by all human persons irrespective of any religious affiliation the other person belongs. Paul and Silas defended their christian and civic rights (cf. Rom. 13: 1ff), yet once they have attained their aim, they comply with lawful authority and refuse to be an 'odd ball' or societal misfit (1 Peter 2:13-17).

Discussion Questions

Why did the magistrates change their minds and send the policemen to discharge Paul and Silas? (Acts 16:35, 38 & 39).

Why did Paul refuse to accept his freedom in this way? (Acts 16:37). Does this attitude have any connection with his future expectations in his missionary labours?

What message has this imprisonment and the consequent ~ dramatic event in the prison brought to the Christians in the early church? (cf. Acts 14:1; 19:10; I Cor. 1:24, Acts 9:19-23).

What role can citizenship play in the spread of the gospel of Christ in a non-christian environment?

Using the conversion of the Phillipian jailer as an example, what role can the inter-faith dialogue among Christians and Muslims play in enhancing peaceful co-existence and mutual understanding in any given community ?

Conclusion

Worthy of note is the jailers' attitude. No sooner he had turned to Christ than he washed the weals upon .the prisoners' backs and set a meal before them. Unless a man's christianity makes him kind, it is not real. Unless a man's professed change of deeds, it is a spurious thing. Christians should act what they confess on their lips, unlike the Pharisees. This is only when christianity is meaningful to those around: us.

Food for thought

What efforts do you make in fostering the spread of the gospel even in a hostile environment and in a life threatening situation?

Acts 17:1-9

Aim: To assure Christians that there is victory for those who are persecuted for the gospel of Christ.

Introduction

Paul's ministry in Thessalonica met with the serious persecution of the Jews. Many Thessalonians were coming into the knowledge of Christ including devout Greeks and leading women. The Jews gathered together people of like-minds who were wicked to set the city in an uproar against Paul and Silas. But when they couldn't, they gave false accusations against Jason their host, saying that they were proclaiming another king Jesus which to them was criminal against the decrees of Caesar. Paul as usual did not bother about the persecution but went on with his missionary work in the synagogue which consequently went under this severe attack. Their charge was political insurrection. They know that their charge was false but wanted to quench the spread of any gospel that will exalt Jesus over and above the Roman Emperor.

This event became a revolution. This is what christianity is meant to champion. Jesus ministry was revolutionary. Revolution is possible without violence. It is obvious here that at Thessalonica, three week's ministry at the Jewish synagogue gave Paul a chance to re-emphasise the centrality of his message (Acts 17:3).

During his stay some were convinced and won over to faith in Jesus as the Messiah and Lord. This response angered the Jews as mentioned above who consequently raised the rabble against the visiting missionaries on the handy charge that they preached a subversive message which brought about disloyalty to Roman Emperor and government (Acts 17:6-7). The evidence for this accusation was the proclamation of the kingdom of Jesus, which the Jews interpreted in a malicious way to mean that the christian preachers were political agitators, offering a rival Emperor to Caesar. Jason at whose house the apostles were lodging, was required to give an assurance that his guests were not seditiously minded (Acts 17:9) and to make sure that Jason agreed that the apostles should not be 'bound over' and prevented from speaking in Thessalonica. This was what led to their departure from Thessalonica to Berea. The fact is well established in this passage that christianity is needed to be preached even in a hostile environment.

Whatever situation we face as Christians in an unchristian environment, God will still make it possible for those who will come to Jesus to do so even among the non-christians. The mandate given to Christians as put in the Great Commission should be fulfilled at all costs.

Discussion Questions

Why was Paul's ministry attacked by Jews in Thessalonica? (Acts 17:6-8).

What was the core of Paul's message in Thessalonica? (Acts 17:3(b)) and why?

Who was Jason? What was his offence to the Jews? (Acts 17:7).

How far has persecution enhanced the spread of the gospel in the early church? (Acts 8, 9 & 10).

Identify new methods which the church can embark upon to spread the gospel of Christ in a heavily Muslim dominated communities?

Conclusion

The word of God is expected to turn the world upside down. By implication, the world should shake to its foundation to be able to bring out a new life out of the sinful world of ours. Compare Paul's theology of resurrection (I Cor. 15:35-50). Christianity is a revolutionary religion. Our business is to preach the word, conversion is of God. But there must be good human relations among the religionists to enhance peaceful co-existence and unity of purpose which will eventually pave way for conversion.

Food for thought

Evangelism is not a sedative, but social and spiritual dynamite for every christian.

Paul before Agrippa: Acts 26

Where and when? This story takes place in the year 60, at Caesarea, capital of the Roman province of Judea, on the coast between Haifa and Jaffa, about 90 km from Jerusalem.

Paul has already been there, in prison, for two years. He had been arrested in Jerusalem, following a riot about his suspected disrespect for Jewish law and custom. The Roman procurator Felix had moved Paul from Jerusalem to Caesarea for Paul's safety because some Jews had planned to kill him. He also wanted to chat with Paul, partly to satisfy a passing interest in religious questions and partly to get a present from Paul in exchange for his freedom. After two years of conversations, Felix had received no gift from Paul, but he was transferred. His replacement in Caesarea was Porcius Festus.

Festus believed that the case was an internal question for Jewish law and he wanted to send Paul back to Jerusalem, but Paul did not believe that he would get a fair trial if he returned to Jerusalem, so he told Festus he was a Roman citizen and wished to appeal to Caesar. Surprised that Paul was a citizen, Festus set about arranging to send him to Rome, and Paul waited in prison.

King Agrippa and his sister Berenice came to visit Festus at this time, and Festus decided to entertain his guests with an interview with Paul. Agrippa and Berenice were great-grandchildren of the King Herod who had ordered the massacre of the little boys when the Magi had not told him where they had found Jesus. They were children of the Herod mentioned in Acts 12, who executed James the son of Zebedee and tried to kill Peter. The king in today's story, called Agrippa II, ruled over a very small area in the Lebanese mountains called Beqa`a or Chalcis, and he knew a lot about Jewish law and customs.

Berenice seems not to have said much in this meeting, but she provides a feminine presence. The three main characters are Paul, Festus and Agrippa. Paul's speech makes Agrippa (and perhaps Berenice) uncomfortable, probably because Agrippa does not want to follow the argument and change as Paul is suggesting. But Agrippa says that Paul has done nothing wrong and deserves to be set free. This is impossible, however, because Paul has appealed to Caesar, and Caesar must now decide the case.

This story is full of ironies. Paul could have been free if he had not appealed to Caesar; instead, the authorities are now sending him exactly where he wanted to go. Agrippa, the descendant of the men who had tried to kill Jesus and his followers, says that Paul has done nothing wrong by serving Jesus.

Paul has dual citizenship, but his real loyalty is with his faith. He respects Jewish law and Roman authority but his first commitment is to Jesus. Festus is a colonial official whose job it is to keep peace among the subject peoples. He is a Roman citizen and as an official he is supposed to uphold the official emperor cult. Paul had been born a Roman citizen but Festus had probably bought this status. Agrippa, with his Edomite ancestry and his familiarity with Jewish religion, is not serious about faith. He has a royal title, but he is in fact a puppet.

The major irony, of course, is that Paul is a prisoner, in chains, and he is the one who offers words of liberty to the king and all the others who are listening. Apparently, it is Paul who must establish his innocence and justify his beliefs, when Paul is really the one who is free and trying to guide his hearers to share true freedom. Indeed, he nearly succeeds, but the king cannot break free from his fears and hesitations. A little more, he says, and you will make me a Christian, but he is actually the one who needs to adjust his spiritual perspective, however slightly. Paul is ready to take the time necessary, but the last irony is that it is Agrippa who cannot face the real choice in life. He needed only to take the first step in faith and Jesus would be there to guide him further, ever further.

This dilemma of Agrippa's reminds me of a series of questions posed by John Bell:

Will you come and follow me if I but call your name?

Will you go where you don't know and never be the same?

Will you let my love be shown, will you let my name be known,

Will you let my life be grown in you and you in me?

Will you leave yourself behind if I but call your name?

Will you care for cruel and kind and never be the same?

Will you risk the hostile stare should your life attract or scare?

Will you let me answer prayer in you and you in me?

We too have a number of questions we could ponder. Which aspect of Paul's presentation is the most persuasive? Is it the arguments he chooses with the king in mind? Is it his command of Jewish teachings? Is it his delivery? Or is it his conviction and the way it fully informs his acts and his being? Could Paul have done something else to convince Agrippa? What is the preacher's role in witness? Must we "succeed" each time in "bringing someone to Jesus"? 'What does the Lord require of you? To do justice, to love kindness and to walk humbly with our God' (Micah 6:8) How do we do this? Is it really enough?

Festus and Agrippa have a political duty which makes it hard for them to commit themselves to Christian faith or practice. Paul seems at ease in his role as a faithful Jew and loyal Roman citizen, but the Jewish authorities have already tried to kill him, and we are told that when he does finally arrive in Rome he will soon die in a persecution ordered by the very Ceasar to whom he has submitted his case. How does our commitment to Jesus affect our loyalty to the state or our community and our attitudes to other Christians and other neighbours? A few months ago, in a place not very far from here, a gang of Jukun Christians raises a camp of Christian Fulbe and killed several of them because, so they said, these people could not possibly be as serious Christians as they were themselves. Does our commitment to follow Jesus set limits on our loyalties, on our speech, on our attitudes or on our actions.?

In another place near my present home, a couple was allowed to live in a rural area among the local people, but the chief first extracted a promise that there would be no preaching. This was easy enough for the couple, who were a nurse and a veterinarian, and they spent several years serving this community wit their very useful skills. Eventually, they had to return to their home in Denmark. A few years later, an evangelist from another part of Nigeria came to live I the same area, and he began to tell the people about Jesus. You can imagine his surprise when one day an elder said to him, "We already know this man. Over there you can see the house where he lived with his wife." What was the secret of the couple's witness that made it so easy for people to recognize them in the evangelist's stories?

"After that," said Paul (v.19), " I was not disobedient to the heavenly vision." Can we say the same?