



Revd Ro's Reflection on First Sunday after Trinity

Proper 5

Year A

Romans 4.13-25

Matthew 9.9-13,18-26

Today is also St. Barnabas' Day; for continuity I am looking at the readings set for Proper 5 however I thought it would be interesting to look at who Barnabas was.

He is mentioned most often in the Acts of the Apostles. We are told he sold all he had and gave the proceeds to the early church. He became a leader and is described as a Levite from Cyprus. He introduced Paul to the Apostles in Jerusalem. He was sent to Antioch to guide and teach the Christians there. Needing help he went to Paul in Tarsus and Barnabas became his colleague on his missionary journeys.

Looking at our gospel reading for Proper 5 I think it is important to put it in its context. Matthew has told us of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount and these next chapters deal with Jesus' healing ministry but I think we need to pause to look at Jesus' stilling of the storm. He had got into the boat to go across the lake to escape the vast crowds. The Sea of Galilee is not always a tranquil place and one of the frequent storms with which the lake is plagued brews up suddenly and hits the disciples' boat.

²³ 'And when he got into the boat, his disciples followed him. ²⁴A gale arose on the lake, so great that the boat was being swamped by the waves; but he was asleep. ²⁵ And they went and woke him up, saying, 'Lord, save us! We are perishing!' ²⁶ And he said to them, 'Why are you afraid, you of little faith?' Then he got up and rebuked the winds and the sea; and there was a dead calm. ²⁷They were amazed, saying, 'What sort of man is this, that even the winds and the sea obey him?' (Matthew 8).

I include this for two reasons; firstly this shows Jesus' power over the elements. This is, if you like, supernatural power. No human being can still a storm. Jesus is human but he is also divine, God incarnate and this passage illustrates his great power, the power of God as the disciples say, 'What sort of man is this, that even the winds and the sea obey him?' Secondly to underline the reaction of the disciples when hit by the storm, naturally they are terrified. Now these men are fishermen,

experienced sailors, they knew what they were doing in a boat but the power of the storm is such that they are terrified for their lives, it is natural then that they rush to Jesus for help. His reaction, 'Why are you afraid, you of little faith?' is important. Firstly he is telling them that his time has not yet come, God is with them and there is no need to be afraid, but secondly he is pointing out their lack of faith and that lack of faith is in contrast to the great faith we see displayed in our gospel reading.

⁹ 'As Jesus was walking along, he saw a man called Matthew sitting at the tax booth; and he said to him, 'Follow me.' And he got up and followed him.' (Matthew 9)

This is so like Jesus walking along the shore of the sea of Galilee and calling the fishermen. Immediately they respond to his 'I will make you fish for people.' Now it is the turn of Matthew, Jesus chooses some unlikely people, uneducated simple fishermen and now a taxman of all things. Then of course the tax gatherer was seen as beyond the pale, not only because he collected taxes for the occupying Roman force and was therefore seen as a collaborator but also because tax gatherers would often feather their own nest. They would charge more than they should and pocket the difference for themselves thereby earning themselves a nice living. Matthew however does not hesitate, he turns his back on all that and without question we are told simply follows Jesus.

¹⁰ 'And as he sat at dinner in the house, many tax-collectors and sinners came and were sitting with him and his disciples.'

No doubt Matthew has had a lavish meal prepared in his own home and, proud to show his connection with this young rabbi, has invited all his tax gatherer friends. The Pharisees who have not been invited but certainly have something to say are not pleased at all,

¹¹ 'When the Pharisees saw this, they said to his disciples, 'Why does your teacher eat with tax-collectors and sinners?' ¹²But when he heard this, he said, 'Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. ¹³ Go and learn what this means, "I desire mercy, not sacrifice." For I have come to call not the righteous but sinners.'

This sums up Jesus' mission, he has been sent first to, 'The lost sheep of the house of Israel' Jesus goes where he is needed; he does not go to the smart places he goes to those who need to turn from sin and turn to him. He goes to the sick and the poor, the needy and the oppressed. The irony in Jesus' comment to the Pharisees is that they don't recognise themselves as oppressors; they don't recognise themselves in need of healing. As far as they are concerned they have it right with God and they are the ones to be saved. How wrong can you be, and indeed Jesus will call them, 'blind guides.' It is the others who are classed as sinners by people such as the Pharisees, who accept their need of repentance and healing. It is those people who turn to Jesus and have faith in him. Those who think they are the ones who are saved by God reject him and eventually will hand him over to crucifixion.

Jesus has brought a new way, a new dawn. With him has come the new way of God. In God's eyes there is no status, no male and no female all are equally loved as his children. If we turn to God in Jesus Christ, if we follow his teachings and try to live in his way then we can call our heavenly Father 'Abba' and through Jesus we will receive salvation, forgiveness of sins and new life with him.

Matthew has made that decision, he has thrown off the old life like a skin and he has re-clothed himself with Christ and from now on he will follow his new master and become one of the disciples. It is while Jesus is still eating that he is disturbed,

¹⁸ 'While he was saying these things to them, suddenly a leader of the synagogue came in and knelt before him, saying, 'My daughter has just died; but come and lay your hand on her, and she will live.'

This synagogue leader is a devout Jew yet he does not hesitate to go to Jesus. He is desperate, his daughter has just died and here in the town is the rabbi he has heard so much about. This man can work wonders; he can heal, so he rushes to him in faith that Jesus can raise her. All it needs for her to live is for the touch of Jesus. It is the most extreme of circumstances but he has faith; contrast that to Jesus' comment about the disciples' lack of faith earlier.

Jesus looks into his heart, sees his faith and does not hesitate. Even now, when the girl has died he has the power to turn it around. He has the power to turn death into life. Of course Jesus has the power to do that for us when he vanquishes death forever; he rises from the tomb and wins eternal life for us. For now he follows the leader of the synagogue. Only God has power over death just as only God can still a storm.

Yet even as he walks towards the house he is stopped.

²⁰ 'Then suddenly a woman who had been suffering from haemorrhages for twelve years came up behind him and touched the fringe of his cloak, ²¹ for she said to herself, 'If I only touch his cloak, I will be made well.'

The two miracles are linked because a Jew would not touch a corpse or a woman who had any form of issue of blood. Both would render the person unclean and they would have to take special cleansing and wait for a stipulated period before they would be considered clean. Jesus has touched on this when he talks about the priest who passes the man on the Jericho road because, as a priest, he could not take his role in the temple when unclean. The woman has great faith, she does not stop Jesus, in fact she does not touch him probably because of the rule of uncleanness. She only touches the hem of his robe, that she believes will be enough to cure her. She, like the leader of the synagogue, is desperate; think of the suffering she has undergone for twelve years. Think of the medical treatments she would have endured. She was an outcast really; no one would want to touch her. Life is losing any meaning, that is until she sees the teacher. Suddenly she knows he can cure her, even just touching his robe will do it. What faith!

At once Jesus knows. Even in all that throng he knows that someone in need of healing has touched him. In Luke chapter 8 we are given more detail,

'As he went, the crowds pressed in on him. ⁴³ Now there was a woman who had been suffering from haemorrhages for twelve years; and though she had spent all she had on physicians, no one could cure her. ⁴⁴She came up behind him and touched the fringe of his clothes, and immediately her haemorrhage stopped. ⁴⁵Then Jesus asked, 'Who touched me?' When all denied it, Peter said, 'Master, the crowds surround you and press in on you.' ⁴⁶But Jesus said, 'Someone touched me; for I noticed that power had gone out from me.' ⁴⁷ When the woman saw that she could not remain hidden, she came trembling; and falling down before him, she declared in the presence of all the people why she had touched him, and how she had been immediately healed. ⁴⁸He said to her, 'Daughter, your faith has made you well; go in peace.'

This is important for the woman is healed and Jesus feels the power flow from him to her. The bleeding stops, she is whole again, Jesus has restored her to fullness of life. As she trembles before him we can see him looking at her not only in compassion but in respect for her. He knows her faith and as he says, it is because of your faith in me that you have been cured. It is, if you like, the same for us, it is because of our faith in Jesus that our lives have been turned around and we are whole again.

²³ 'When Jesus came to the leader's house and saw the flute-players and the crowd making a commotion, ²⁴he said, 'Go away; for the girl is not dead but sleeping.' And they laughed at him. (Matthew 9)

He gives them short shrift and sends them away. He does so because there is no room for death rituals near the living. This little girl will be raised through the power of God in Jesus Christ.

²⁵ 'But when the crowd had been put outside, he went in and took her by the hand, and the girl got up. ²⁶ And the report of this spread throughout that district.'

It is a beautiful domestic detail, Jesus stands quietly with the girl, and he takes her by the hand and lifts her up. With his touch she is alive again; just as later he will raise Lazarus. Jesus is working in the power of God. No one has power over death, only Jesus the incarnate God.

No wonder the wonder of his deeds spread throughout the land. No wonder the powers that be are figuring out ways to get rid of this man who is a direct threat to their power, to the whole system. Of course he is the dawn of a new day, the Kingdom of God has begun in Jesus.

As we turn to our reading from Romans the film, 'Whistle down the wind,' came to mind. You remember that three children find a bearded man in their barn. He is a fugitive murderer but they decide he is Jesus and has to be hidden from the authorities who killed him the first time he came and may do so again. They are totally protective but refuse to let the other children visit until one little girl says, 'We can see Jesus if we want to, he is not your private property!' Now St. Paul is the Apostle to the Gentiles, he is bringing the good news of Jesus Christ to all nations and establishing Christian churches. Many Jewish converts however had decided that because they were God's chosen people then the new church must conform to Judaism and that Jesus was their private property. What St. Paul is arguing in this passage is that that is not true. The badge of conformity to Judaism was circumcision. Therefore some Jews were demanding that converts to Christianity from other nations should conform to Jewish practices and be circumcised. Secondly they should be bound by Jewish law. After all Christianity was an offshoot of Judaism wasn't it?

No, says Paul, Jesus Christ is not your private property, God will not be limited. Jesus Christ is co-creator of all that is. God cannot be confined, he made all peoples and he loves all people equally. So he goes right back to the beginning to argue his case.

¹³ 'For the promise that he would inherit the world did not come to Abraham or to his descendants through the law but through the righteousness of faith.'

Here in the very first sentence we have the key, let's go back to the founding Father, Abraham. God called Abraham and he told him he would 'inherit the world.' The promise of God is for the whole world, not a tiny corner of it. You can't say God did this because of circumcision, Abraham bore no badge of Judaism then. God chose him because of the law, the law had not been given; that was given to the people at Mount Sinai by God through his servant Moses. Neither of these things is the be all and end all as you seem to think. No, there is only one central thing, that is faith, and that is what Abraham had in abundance. The law cannot save you.

¹⁴ 'If it is the adherents of the law who are to be the heirs, faith is null and the promise is void.'

¹⁵ 'For the law brings wrath; but where there is no law, neither is there violation.'

So Paul's argument is carefully constructed.

¹⁶ 'For this reason it depends on faith, in order that the promise may rest on grace and be guaranteed to all his descendants, not only to the adherents of the law but also to those who share the faith of Abraham (for he is the father of all of us, ¹⁷as it is written, 'I have made you the father of

many nations')—in the presence of the God in whom he believed, who gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist.'

Paul makes the important point that they must understand, anyone who turns to Christ from any nation can then say that Abraham is my Father. Jesus Christ is Messiah, and the scriptures point to him from the beginning. The Jews do not possess Abraham at all, any more than newly converted Christians. In God's eyes there is no national status, neither is there any partiality. To use an anachronism, stop thinking that this is a train with two classes, first and second, it is not, all are one in Christ and all have the scriptures as their background. The key to it all is that you have not earned anything, no more have we. All is dependent upon God's grace freely given to humankind in love. The promise God made to Abraham was that he would be the father of many nations, look how that is coming true in Christ Jesus. These Christians will, as the scriptures foretold, be as numerous as the sand on the shore. All created by God, all saved through God's grace in Jesus. All who turn to Christ, Jew or Gentile will receive all the 'benefits of his passion' we will all receive forgiveness and eternal life through him. So then going back to Abraham, what distinguished him was faith, God's promise that he would be the father of many nations would humanly speaking be impossible in old age, but nothing is impossible to God. Abraham placed his life into God's hands in total faith,

¹⁸ 'Hoping against hope, he believed that he would become 'the father of many nations', according to what was said, 'So numerous shall your descendants be.' ¹⁹He did not weaken in faith when he considered his own body, which was already as good as dead (for he was about a hundred years old), or when he considered the barrenness of Sarah's womb. ²⁰No distrust made him waver concerning the promise of God, but he grew strong in his faith as he gave glory to God, ²¹ being fully convinced that God was able to do what he had promised.'

Indeed that covenant, that promise, was fulfilled and Abraham did not waver. Nor must we waver in faith. Circumcision, the law, those things won't save you! Never think of yourselves as inferior or superior, no all are one in Christ and all are equal in God's eyes. What saves us is faith in Jesus Christ our crucified and risen Lord.

²² 'Therefore his faith 'was reckoned to him as righteousness.' ²³Now the words, 'it was reckoned to him', were written not for his sake alone, ²⁴ but for ours also. It will be reckoned to us who believe in him who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead, ²⁵ who was handed over to death for our trespasses and was raised for our justification.'

As St. John puts it chapter 3 v 16,

¹⁶ 'For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. ¹⁷"Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. ¹⁸Those who believe in him are not condemned; but those who do not believe are condemned already, because they have not believed in the name of the only Son of God.'

To everyone who believes in Jesus, Jew or Gentile divisions are meaningless. We are all children of God, co-heirs with Christ and we will come into the kingdom of God. We will in God's time be part of his newly created order when Christ will return as king and judge of all.

Last week on Trinity Sunday we read Christ's great commission to the disciples.

¹⁸ And Jesus came and said to them, 'All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. ¹⁹Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, ²⁰and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.' (Matthew 28)

Firstly go out to all nations, secondly I am always with you I will never leave you. What a wonderful promise God's Holy Spirit is always with us. Ours is not a distant God, God is a loving God, three persons in one who is with us now and who always will be. Every person who turns to Jesus is equal in his sight. That should be so with us, status, superiority and such like has no place within the church of Jesus.

'Bind us together Lord, Bind us together in love.' Bob Gillman.

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