

February 17, 2008

Most of you will be aware of what is called the "scandal of Christianity", if not in the formal, technical sense, then simply in your experience of the call to faith. This "scandal" is the offence which Christian belief presents to our sensibilities. It takes many forms. Until relatively recently in our society the scandal of Christianity was for many simply the offence of religious belief itself – that one would believe in God in the light of the knowledge of the world we have today. More recently, the scandal has been felt more sharply in relation to the claim that Christian faith is somehow different from, or superior to, other religious traditions. At another level, the scandal can be that there is at the heart of the Christian story a crucifixion, and that the God and Lord over all things is somehow specially located in the dead body of Jesus of Nazareth. This is, in St Paul's language, a scandal to the Jews and foolishness to the Greeks. Even worse, and just as offensively, this crucifixion becomes the framework for the life of the Christian disciple – "...if any would be my disciple, let them take up their cross and follow me".

What these different levels of the scandal of Christian faith have in common is that they contradict what would seem to be "common" sense. In certain circles "common sense" would dictate that religious belief is nonsensical and illogical, or that the focus on one religious tradition among many is arrogant, or that talk about another person dying such a death as crucifixion on our behalf is horrendous and unjust.

What causes the offence or scandal is the tendency of Christian faith in all things to stand out, not quite fitting with our normal expectations. Of course, this is not only confined to things particularly Christian. This last week there's been a great furore following the suggestion of the Archbishop that elements of Islamic law might be incorporated into the British legal system. Whatever he meant by that – and it couldn't have meant returning to public lashings or the cutting off of thieves' hands – the extraordinary force of the public response had to do with the sense that things Islamic are not going to fit into the wider fabric of post-Christian, Western law and society.

But keeping just with the problem of the offence of Christian faith, what we see arising when these scandals are felt is the so-called "liberal" option. "Liberal" is something of a swear-word in some Christian circles, usually standing for attempts to "water down" what seems to be too hard in received religious doctrine or practice. Typically, "liberal" is set in contrast to "conservative", giving the sense that one group wants to conserve what is received,

and the other wants to be free of such tradition.

Yet in fact the liberal approach is better understood as having to do with the scandal and offence of Christian faith. For what seems particular and odd, for what doesn't seem to fit into wider rationality or sensibility, the "liberal" seeks a broader base to make sense of what apparently doesn't make sense. This can take a more extreme form, like the conclusion of Feuerbach we met last week – that gods are simply the fruit of anxious and active imaginations, the projections of our hopes and fears. More moderately, liberalism might attempt to account for embarrassing differences in the telling of the same stories in the gospels by appealing to patterns in modern eye-witness accounts of events. The theological liberal seeks, to various degrees, to harmonise the content of faith with other things we know, for the content of faith is often starkly out of tune with what we expect or look for.

The apparent senselessness of faith features in the two readings we've heard this morning. In the first one, God – apparently quite out of the blue – addresses Abram and directs him to leave his country and kindred and to go to a land which God will show to him. This is startling enough as it is; more startling, however, is that Abram actually does just this. Out of all the peoples described in the preceding chapter of Genesis, one person and his family are chosen. And this one is to become a blessing for all the families of the earth. This is a ridiculous suggestion, especially for us in our multi-cultural, pluralistic world.

In the second reading – the Gospel – we heard a similarly nonsensical suggestion, now on the lips of Jesus. Nicodemus, apparently a scholar and teacher of the Jewish people, is told by Jesus that he must be "born again".¹ "How can it be so?" is Nicodemus' understandable response. This is ignored by Jesus, who then goes on to make use of a pun in the Greek (Hebrew, Aramaic) and speaks of those who are born of the Spirit as being like the wind, moving here and there unpredictably and yet properly and effectively.² Nicodemus stands before us, as us – confronted by the scandalous way in which Jesus and his teaching doesn't fit. While it might be a nice idea that the Spirit blows as the wind, where it will, this is scarcely a basis upon which most of us imagine that we could build our lives, should we desire to be people of that Spirit.

Because Jesus makes no clear sense, Nicodemus asks on our behalf, "how can these things be?" But, at the same time, Nicodemus *is* a Jew – indeed a

¹ Or, as it could also be translated, "born from above".

² The pun is that "spirit" and "wind" are both possible translations of the same Greek or Hebrew word.

teacher of the Jews. That is to say, his very being as a devout man is built upon the strange address of God to Abram, and Abram's stranger response. And so what is happening in this exchange is that, in hearing and misunderstanding what Jesus is talking about, Nicodemus hears, and misunderstands, the heart of his own story. Jesus puts to him nothing other than the call to Abram, and Nicodemus doesn't hear it, for Abraham as the father of the Jews has become (for Nicodemus at least), a static fact in the past, something simply to be known and accepted, and not the possibility of a particular way of living in the present.

Now, in fact this is not the end of the story for Nicodemus. He appears again at the end of John's gospel, but with a very interesting twist. As we've heard this morning, to begin with Nicodemus comes to Jesus "by night" – under cover of darkness, or perhaps (symbolically) in his own darkness. Following the crucifixion Nicodemus appears again. However, he is here "Nicodemus, who had *at first* come to Jesus by night", and now publicly and in the brightness of the day he brings spices for the embalming of Jesus' body. In the course of Jesus' ministry Nicodemus has become a disciple – what a child of Abraham should be. To link the strangeness of Jesus' born-again talk with the call to Abram, it is as if Jesus himself travels the journey of Abraham and Sarah – responding to the incomprehensible call of God – while Nicodemus watches. And in watching Jesus on the path to the cross, Nicodemus moves from the night to the day, from the dark to the light, and so also moves from what he has lost about his own faith heritage to rediscovering it again.

Our epistle reading for today we've not yet heard, but it relates directly to this point (Romans 4.1-5, 13-17):

What then are we to say was gained by Abraham, our ancestor according to the flesh? For if Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about, but not before God.

For what does the scripture say? "Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness."

Now to one who works, wages are not reckoned as a gift but as something due. But to one who without works trusts him who justifies the ungodly, such faith is reckoned as righteousness.

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.

If it is the adherents of the law who are to be the heirs, faith is null and the promise is void. For the law brings wrath; but where there is no law, neither is there violation.

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, as 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. [NRSV]

It's long, and complicated, but Paul's point is this: it is not merely by virtue of being in direct descent from Abraham that we can be his children. The children of Abraham are those who have the faith of Abraham – whether his direct descendants or not. At the end of that passage Paul spoke of the God of Abraham as the one "who gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist". Nicodemus is just such a dead one, in whom understanding of the ways of this God has not yet come into being. Jesus is the one who lives the Spirit-filled life, the one who does as Abram did.

But more than this, Jesus himself becomes the blessing to the nations (Genesis 12). Abraham responded to the call, and with varying degrees of success trusted God, up to the point that he died and was buried in a foreign land, not yet the land promised him by God. Abraham waits, as it were, for the promise to be fulfilled.

In Jesus the promise is fulfilled – a human being lives the promise of a life with God, even to the point of death upon a cross. His achievement becomes Abraham's achievement, and Nicodemus', and ours – by the promise of God. Christian faithfulness is a striving which has already achieved through Christ's work what it continues to seek to achieve – the life of the Spirit: free as the wind, bound to love.

Overcoming the scandal and offensiveness of belief is a matter of watching faith work in the life of Jesus, and allowing that light to illuminate the dark places of our fears and hesitations. God "so loved the world that he gave his Son" to live the life of the Spirit for us, that we too might live it in his light.

By the continuing grace of the God who continues to call and to make possible a faithful response, may all God's people turn their eyes to Jesus, the Christ who journeys for us and leads us into the light of day.