

Sunday 28 October 2007: Bible Sunday

Expecting the unexpected

Readings: Roman 15:1-6; Luke 4:16-24

When he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, he went to the synagogue on the sabbath day, as was his custom. He stood up to read, and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. Then he began to say to them, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."

One Sunday morning in late spring last year, I, and a surprisingly large number of other people, gathered at the Wetlands Centre in Barnes, south-west London at about 4am. (I think I came back to preach at the 10am that morning, which must make it one of those rare occasions when the preacher was in greater danger of falling asleep during the sermon than the congregation!)

The reason for our early gathering was to take part in a "Dawn Chorus Walk". That may not be everyone's idea of a Saturday night on the town, but believe me it was fabulous! The tentative light breaking through the mist of that spring morning, across the dozing reedbeds and smooth water; the first chirruping notes of the earliest feathery risers gradually swelling into a confident cacophony as each stated their claim to the new day – it felt as holy than a thousand spoken prayers!

The group I was in was led by an enthusiastic and knowledgeable young man who rapidly and with great assurance pointed in different directions - "wren, wren, blackcap, wren". The technique of identifying the different species was, he explained, quite simple. First, tune in to the most familiar sounds, the robin, the blackbird and allow your ears to get used to them. Then you gradually pick up the less slightly familiar, the chaffinch, the willow warbler and so on. It helps to have someone who knows them all, but as a technique it works.

I shouldn't have been surprised really because that's how much scientific observation and testing works. Keep repeating things until you know exactly what to expect and then you are more prepared for the things you don't expect. And that's probably true in music too – it's when you are familiar with a piece of music that you hear the harmonies and notice the colours and textures that distinguish great music from good.

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When I was on retreat during the summer, I followed the Ignatian spiritual practice of what's called "imaginative contemplation". It means reading a passage of scripture and putting yourself in the scene, hearing, seeing, touching, tasting and smelling the whole picture. It means staying with the words perhaps for up to hour, through all the distractions of wandering mind and cluttered thoughts and letting it speak; and returning to it and letting it speak again. And what happens when you do that can be a little like waiting for the dawn. For occasionally, just occasionally, amongst the familiar, amongst Gospel stories you've heard a thousand times before, your ears that are tuned to the expected, hear the unexpected, the unfamiliar. Suddenly the black and white words on the page vibrate with colours and hues you never knew were there. Suddenly a word or a phrase or image turns somersaults and does backflips and leads you into encounters and journeys unimaginable. Sometimes, just

occasionally, you are there in that synagogue in Nazareth, knowing that at that moment, for that nanosecond or less, the living God who breathes through the words of scripture is there with you and today the scripture is fulfilled in your hearing.

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Today is Bible Sunday, a day when we recognise the centrality and importance of the word of scripture in defining who we are as a community of faith. Today, like Paul writing to the Romans, we acknowledge that this disparate collection of writings that we know as the Bible was written for our instruction, our encouragement and to give us hope. And yet we also know the sorrowful truth that those words around which we are called to gather are too often a source of division; words of hope and encouragement are too easily used to judge and condemn; the good news of Jesus Christ can too readily become the bad news of human ego and human defensiveness.

For me, being a "Bible based church" has nothing to do with moral high ground or exclusive dogma – it has everything to do with the living God whose word is spoken through the scriptures. I believe that when you take the scriptures seriously, read them regularly and pray them passionately what you get is not certainty but possibility; what you get is not answers but questions that leave you longing for more; what you get is not definite direction but a compelling call to go deeper into the mystery of this always new and ever surprising God; what you get is not grounds for self-justification but the reality of a God who embraces our human vulnerability and sinfulness and who in living, dying and rising opens the door to life in all its fullness.

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Today Thomas Braganza takes a new and important step in his journey into a deeper relationship with that living God, and with the living Word. You don't know it yet Thomas, but today through the water of baptism, you too are called to follow the pattern of the living Word, as you enter with Jesus Christ into his dying and rising. Today, your parents and godparents will promise to do all the things that will enable you to become familiar with the word of scripture, so familiar that the ears of your heart may be tuned to listen for the unfamiliar and the unexpected and to the possibilities this God of life and love longs to offer to you and to each one of us.

After you've been through the waters of baptism, you'll be given a candle as a sign of that new life made real in the crucified and risen Christ. And as you grow and learn Thomas like each of us, you'll sometimes feel there are days when the words of scripture stay fixed and lifeless on the page; when there's no sign of dancing colours but only murky shades of grey. You like each of us will experience times when the light of dawn seems far away and the night seems endless. But the journey you undertake today of dying and rising with Christ enables you and us to keep looking to that light; keep believing that, even then, the scripture is fulfilled in our hearing - for that is the reality of the living God who dwells among us in the Word made flesh – the light that shines in the darkness and the darkness cannot overcome it.