

**St Bartholomew
Derby Cathedral Evensong
24 August 2008**

Ecclesiasticus 39: 1-10
Matthew 10: 1-22

Both readings this evening speak to me of discipleship and ministry.

- *The one who seeks out wisdom penetrates the subtleties of parables; he seeks out hidden meanings and is at home with the obscurities.*

Is this a model for ministry?

- *He sets his heart on rising; he opens his mouth in prayer and asks pardon for his sins. If the great Lord is willing, he will be filled with the spirit of understanding;*
- *he travels in foreign lands*

In January Susan and I went on a pilgrimage to Jerusalem and Galilee. It was a stunning trip for all sorts of reasons. To put some geographical and geological context on to the Holy Scripture that we read and hear. To see the personal context and cultural contexts too.

And then on Friday we returned from 4 days in Rome. Amongst all the splendours of Rome, what sticks in my mind is the visit off the tourist track to St Paul's outside the walls, the place where Paul is buried, every bit as much a pilgrimage as Jerusalem and Galilee. After all—and it is easy to forget—Christianity is very much a religion of the Roman empire. Indeed, it's debatable whether it would have survived as long as it has were it not for the fact that Emperor Constantine made it his state church.

The writer of Ecclesiasticus tells us that such trips are a good thing, and here is why I think they are. They brought home to me the fact that Christianity is a very broad faith, a catholic faith. When you go to these places, you realise that the biggest single group of Christians look to Rome, and then a large number look to Constantinople and Moscow. And you see that in Jerusalem the Coptic churches – the African Christians – are a significant group. You see Christians and Moslems and Jews sharing the same holy sites and living in at least coexistence. You see that all these groups do things in their own way. You begin to realise, if you hadn't already, that the churches in England are really quite insignificant in the big scheme of things. You come to realise that in terms of the Body of Christ, the Anglican church is but a mere pimple on the side of the body. A festering pimple sometimes.

It is good to realise this because it helps to cure us from the disease of thinking that the way we do things is the only way that matters. This way of thinking is to be found when we hear people saying that only their way of doing things matters. And it can be very local. In my last clerical job I worked in a team of 10 churches, where I was dealing with 18 churchwardens, some of whom felt that only the way they did things was the correct way. Thankfully, now I deal with only 4 wardens, and none of them is, I think, quite so certain that their way alone is correct ...

Now, with this background, let's turn our attention to the second lesson that tells us something about Jesus' model for discipleship. Look at the variety of people Jesus called. Did he insist that they all thought the same way and did things in the same manner? We know from Holy Scripture that they did not. We need to learn to accept diversity, unity by inclusion, unity in diversity.

Now some other themes.

- Deal with your own people first.

I wonder about the ease with which congregations give to the needy of other countries while neglecting what is on their doorstep. Is this Biblical?

- *The Message: Don't begin by traveling to some far-off place to convert unbelievers. And don't try to be dramatic. Go to the lost, confused people right here in the neighborhood.*

Don't worry about planning too much, just get on and do what needs to be done. I wonder about all the mission initiatives in the church, and wonder if our energy would be better spent just being seen about in the parishes. The trouble is, it is easier to sit in an office and think fine thoughts than it is to be seen about the place.

- *'Don't think you have to put on a fund-raising campaign before you start. You are the equipment, and all you need to keep that going is three meals a day. Travel light.*

I wonder about the obsession that churches have with having a lot of money in the bank.

- *If folk welcome you, be gentle in your conversation. If they don't, don't make a scene. Just be on your way.*

Don't flog a dead horse.

- *Be as cunning as a snake. Don't be naive. You have been treated generously, so live generously.*

Be courageous. Take risks. There is that awful modern dismissal of 'take care'. What could be more

unscriptural? Surely, the valediction should be take risks, not take care. That is what the parable of the Talents, amongst other things, is all about: make the most of what you have been given – live life to the full. 'I came that all may live, and live abundantly' – not meanly, or timidly – but bravely, energetically. The church militant, not the church hesitant or the church petulant.

And finally stick at it, don't give in. It's easy to give in and give up. The real heroes of the world are not the Olympic medal winners, on whom vast resources have been lavished, but the ordinary folk who day by day have to deal with the drudgery and trials of the world in which they live. The people who have to trudge miles to get water. The people who day in day out have to deal with chronic illness, the people who day in day out support them, the people who have to deal with the pettiness and inefficiency of the bureaucracies in which we live. All of us who have to deal with the consequences of human pride—our own, and that of others.

When I was in the shop at St Paul's outside the Walls my eye caught sight of a postcard with Paul's hymn to love on it. And something about the combination of that in that place overwhelmed me. All those characteristics that are the opposite of human pride. And suddenly I caught a glimpse of what Paul was trying to do in all his letters.

All this is a call for us to let out the love that is within us, the love that we often imprison within our pride. Paul implores us to be ourselves – that is, our true selves, untainted by pride. That is how we are good disciples. And we need to remember this on St Bartholomew's Day. We know next to nothing about him. But the unsung hero, the one who also watched and waited. You and me. Be yourself. Accept yourself. Holiness is not about being pious, about confusing piety with posturing. It is about being authentically and truly oneself.

Beatitudes: blessed are the meek. The Message: Blessed are they that know their need of God. French Bible: *Heureux les débonnaires, car ils hériteront la terre*. Blessed are the debonair! Without a care, cares only come from pride. Debonair!

There is no need to hide our humanity. Remember that it was Christ's humanity, his wounds, that healed others, and it is our humanity and our wounds that heal others. It's the sight of wounds that tell us a person is speaking from experience, with freshness and straightforwardness. It's that lack of guile that attracts people to Jesus, makes them feel secure around him, and it's all of that in us that gives each of us the ability to serve those in distress, to provide the safety of the sheepfold.

So here's a call to be honest. Do not hide honesty under charm, or good manners, or diplomacy.

All this speaks of my task as a parish priest. It is to teach, to warn, to admonish. To take risks. To help people see that we all are priests—channels of grace.

- to have the courage to be an *explorer* of the new territory in myself and to articulate my discoveries as a service to others.
- to make my fellow man ask painful and unsettling questions, to look behind the surface, to take away the obstacles that prevent us from getting to the heart of the matter.
- to take away the illusory mask of the manipulative world to show what the true situation is, in order to lead people towards hope.

The priest knows he is considered by many as a fool, a madman, a danger to society and a threat to mankind. Or should be.

Bartholomew the saint of whom we know so little, the saint for anyone, for everyone. Bartholomew the everyman. Bartholomew the ordinary. Bartholomew the you and me. Bartholomew, the implied call to be our ordinary selves. God became man so that we might approach God. The glory of God is a human life loved to the full, so let your light shine before the world to illumine the way for others. God grant us all courage to be ourselves as we are, and to accept others as they are, and to let our inner light shine to lighten the way for others.

Be yourself, your glorious, risk-taking self. *Heureux les débonnaires, car ils hériteront la terre*.