

## Sermon at Church of the Ascension 29 April 2007

### “Tell us plainly”

#### Introduction of theme

Where do you position yourself in today’s Gospel reading? Is it alongside Jesus, again putting one over the Jewish leaders, the Pharisees or Sadducees? Do you imagine yourself as one of his disciples, part of the flock that have recognized the voice of Jesus as having the words of eternal life, and resolved to follow Him? Or does that frustrated cry of the Jewish religious bigwigs sound disturbingly familiar?

“How long are you going to keep us in suspense? If you are the Messiah, tell us plainly.”

In fact, this plea could easily be attached to all three of today’s readings. Most of us probably accept that God speaks; we just wish that He would be plainer and spell it out, instead of using poetry and parable and vision. For example, why all this talk of lambs and sheep and shepherds that runs through today’s readings? What’s more, as we seek to puzzle out his meaning, Jesus’ words in the previous chapter of John are hardly going to encourage us:

“I have come to give sight to the blind and to show those who think they see that they are blind.” (John 9:39)

Does God set out deliberately to confuse us, or do we need to adjust our understanding of God? Maybe some truths can only be said in a particular way. Listen to A.W.Tozer:

‘That our idea of God corresponds as nearly as possible to the true being of God is of immense importance to us. Compared with our actual thoughts about Him, our creedal statements are of little consequence. Our real idea of God may lie buried under the rubbish of conventional religious notions and may require an intelligent and vigorous search before it is finally unearthed and exposed for what it is. Only after an ordeal of painful self-probing are we likely to discover what we actually believe about God.’

It’s not just a question of getting our theology straight. Someone has said that ideas have a habit of ending up in people’s heads, and from there they seep into the whole fabric of our spiritual lives and go to the heart of our experience. Today’s readings have the potential to challenge and change our thinking about God and of how He relates to His people.

### **Isaiah 53: 1-6**

Surely this is true of today's Old Testament reading, a part of that famous description of the Messiah as the Suffering Servant? The religious people have brutally misunderstood the sufferings of the wounded healer: 'Who has believed our message?' says Isaiah, and later, 'we thought his troubles were a punishment from God for his own sins.' They misunderstood because they had strayed away like sheep, leaving God's paths to follow their own, deciding for themselves what a Messiah should be. Yet this outwardly unattractive Man of Sorrows speaks to our deepest spiritual needs. Here is one:

- Who identifies with our broken and sick condition
- Who recognizes our longing for forgiveness, healing and peace
- Who realizes that we are unable to reform purely through our own efforts
- Who, as the sacrificial lamb, the Old Testament scapegoat, models submission to God even unto death

We can choose to ignore this, or we can reflect and change our understanding of God.

### **Revelation 7: 9-17**

The same can be said of the New Testament reading, though it is very different in tone. The sacrificed lamb has now become the Lamb before the throne of God. John describes a vision of a very different Temple in which Jesus is glorified and God's plan of salvation is vindicated. For there too are the believers who put their trust in Jesus and were washed clean by His blood. But we are not given an explanation of why it had to be this way. No one could accuse the Book of Revelation of being plain! Instead, we are assured that all will be well, that God will live among His people, shelter them and wipe away all their tears. In response the crowd is caught up, not in discussion, but in praise and worship:

'Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honour and power and strength belong to our God forever and forever. Amen!'

I wonder how much thoughts of heaven and eternal life honestly feature in our real sense of God. The English writer Dennis Lennon says:

'Our faith is nonsense without this sense of moving upwards. Heaven must have the supreme place in our total vision if we are to live with freedom and courage in the present. Only heaven can interpret the mystery of our present experiences. It is not merely the prize for walking faithfully with God; it is where the walk takes us. It is the meaning of the walk, "endless beginning, ceaseless wonder, perpetual resurrection in the inexhausted power of him who everlastingly makes all things new."

At the end Dennis Lennon is himself quoting Austin Farrer who also says: “God does not give us explanations; he gives up a Son.”

For me, educated in a rationalistic world and actively encouraged to be sceptical, this is a hard truth to digest. I want things plain; I want solid proof; I want a manageable sort of God. Just like those Pharisees and Sadducees.

### **John 10: 22-30**

Which brings us back to our starting point, the Gospel story, at the fulcrum of history, looking back to the Suffering Servant of the prophets but speaking of eternity with Jesus. Jesus tells the Jewish leaders that they have got all the proof they need that He is the Messiah, the Redeemer:

“I have already told you, and you don’t believe me. The proof is what I do in the name of my Father.”

But then he goes on to speak rather cryptically of sheep who belong to his flock and hear his voice. The implication is that something prevents these leaders from hearing. What was blocking their ears? Was it power or pride or preconceived ideas? Whatever it was the enemies of Jesus are an uncomfortable reminder that authentic faith may be a long way from cultural Christianity and I ask myself, as I ask you, what comes between us and a truer picture of God?

The answer I have discovered in preparing this sermon is basically that I must allow God to be God. Job realized this, and Paul was converted not by clever arguments – he had plenty of those – but by a vision of Jesus on the Damascus road. Someone once said: ‘the true alternative is not mystery or clarity, but mystery or absurdity.’ Dennis Lennon adds: ‘Real believers choose to go with the undiminished mystery of God.’ I find this scary because I am not big on trust and I like to have all the answers and maintain control. Remember in Genesis the temptation of the serpent for Adam and Eve to be ‘as gods’, or the inhabitants of Babel aspiring to godhead through their technology? On the other hand in our society there is quite enough irrational worship around – be it of celebrities or rock stars or public figures. Our Bible describes a God who is big enough and worthy of worship, but we may well have to let go of some pretty inaccurate ideas. What I am trying to say is beautifully summarized in this final quotation, again from Dennis Lennon, where he talks of the price we pay for trying to meet that request of the Pharisees to make things plain:

‘tampering with the uncomfortable, immense, mysterious, craggy truth of God claims an appalling price. It is like catching a great, flashing, leaping barracuda and reducing it to fish fingers: manageable, marketable, bite-size, uniform, predictable, convenient, certainly practical – and very, very dead’

May God bless and assist our attempts to search for a truer picture of His nature, and may we grow in wonder and understanding as we follow the path of discipleship.