

Epiphany 5
7/2/2010

Mark the Evangelist

Isaiah 6:1-8
Psalm 138
I Corinthians 15:1 – 11
Luke 5:1 - 11

‘But by the grace of God I am what I am ...’

(1 Cor 15:10a)

Sermon preached by Rev. Chris Mostert

[A] Introduction

Sometimes, our experience – whether of disappointment, regret or even shame – makes us think about who or what we really are. Am I the kind, reasonable, gentle person that some people think I am (and that *I myself* sometimes feel I am) or am I the unkind, unreasonable, critical person that those who know me best sometimes see me as being (and that I have to acknowledge I am *in part*)?

On a balanced view, we are neither the one nor the other, but a complex fusion of both; and really not just a combination of two sets of qualities that exist as polar opposites but rather as a complex whole comprising a rich and confusing conglomerate of attractive and unattractive, positive and negative attitudes and behaviours.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the well-known German martyr imprisoned for his participation in the failed plot to assassinate Hitler, had a lot of time on his hands to ponder this question. He committed a good many of his thoughts to paper in what became the widely read *Letters and Papers from Prison*. One of his friends described him as ‘a giant before man, but a child before God’ (CD 14). He knew the battle that wages within us, between *Adam* and *Christ*. At times he was a riddle, a puzzle, to himself, to which he gave expression in a poem: *Who am I?*

‘Who am I? They --- tell me/ I bore the days of misfortune/ equably, smilingly,
proudly,/ like one accustomed to win ... /
Am I then really that which other men tell of? / Or am I only what I myself know
of myself? / Restless and longing and sick, like a bird in a cage, /...
tossing in expectation of great events, / powerlessly trembling for friends at an
infinite distance, / weary and empty at praying, at thinking, at making, / faint, and
ready to say farewell to it all.
... Who am I? They mock me, these lonely questions of mine. ? Whoever I am,
Thou knowest, O God, I am thine.’ (CD 15)

[B] The experience of the Apostle Paul

The apostle **Paul** left us no poems (though plenty of poetic prose [cf. 1 Cor 13]) but was also imprisoned and wrote letters from prison (though not the Corinthian correspondence). He too suffered for his faith: flogging, lashing, stoning and many other dangers (2 Cor 11). He knew the heights and depths, the ecstasy and the agony.

In today’s Epistle reading, that incomparable passage about the resurrection, Paul offers us a powerful twist on the theme, ‘who am I?’ The passage is, of course, about **Christ**, the crucified one who has been raised from death. But in the course of reminding the Corinthian church what he proclaimed to them from the first time he went there, he gives a powerful account of how he regards *himself*.

The first thing he knows – and this is not the only time in his correspondence that he has cause to reflect on it – is that he is an **apostle**: *called* by God and *sent* by God. He has declared what he first received, and what is the most important thing he can hand on to anyone: that Christ died for our sins and that after he was buried he was raised from the dead.

How does he know this? Because Christ made **appearances** to his followers: to Peter, to the Twelve, even to five hundred brothers and sisters, some of whom are still alive as he writes.

And most importantly, Christ had appeared also to **Paul** himself (on the Damascus Road), an experience he recounts several times. That is the most remarkable thing: having been a persecutor of Christians, Paul is surely unworthy to be an apostle. The only way to make any sense of it is to attribute it to **grace**, for nothing in Paul's own life or character made him worthy of this astonishing grace and call to apostleship. 'By the grace of God I am what I am': that is Paul's estimate of it; and he adds, a little self-indulgently, that God's grace toward him has not been in vain (1 Cor 15:10).

[C] The centrality of grace

It should not surprise us, as people with roots in the Reformation, that at the heart of **Paul's** account of his life and work is the reality of grace. *Sola gratia* (by grace alone) was the great catch-cry of the Reformation; echoed, of course, in the hymns of **Charles Wesley**.

As a teacher of theology, working with theological concepts and ideas all the time, it is an abiding temptation to turn these into abstractions; to let clever words about grace somehow displace the reality of it in my own life. So it is necessary to ask myself constantly how real it is for me as a *person*, a *believer*, as distinct from a *theologian*. It's a question I ask aloud this morning, because I think that the temptation I speak of is not confined to theologians and scholars. How much does the word *grace* feature, not in our conversation but in our prayer? How conscious are we, that (in Paul's words) 'we are what we are by the grace of God'?

This is something that connects the **Epistle** reading with both the other readings, especially from **Isaiah**. The passage from ch 6 is probably best known because of its striking vision of the **glory of God**, high and lofty on a throne, with the seraphs (celestial beings with wings) singing the **Trisagion** (the thrice-Holy) which we echo at the beginning of the eucharistic prayer: '*Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts ...*' But we should take care not to miss the prophet's sense of inadequacy and imperfection in the face of this vision: '*Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips ...*' (6:5)

Where is the **grace**? The word doesn't appear in the text, but the reality is nothing less than the grace of God. One of the seraphs touches the prophet's mouth with a live coal taken from the altar, and he is declared forgiven: '*Your guilt has departed and your sin is blotted out.*'

We see the same thing in today's reading from **Luke**: following the extraordinary catch of fish on the lake of *Gennesaret*, when they have gone out a second time at the command of Jesus, **Peter** falls down before Jesus: 'Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man.' (5:8) In the presence of Jesus he is painfully aware of his inadequacy, just as **Isaiah** was when he saw the glory of the Holy One. But **Peter** too is drawn beyond this sense of unworthiness before Jesus, who tells him not to be afraid. He too is what he is by grace.

Can we relate to this? The word *sin* has become a problematic word, even in the church. The reason is at least twofold: not only has the church at times gone on about it too much, but we've trivialised the meaning of sin. It has come to mean something like 'behaving badly'. We have largely lost the sense of sin as a power that destroys and distorts and alienates and against which we are powerless; or as the condition of brokenness that affects everything around us, within us and between us and other people. We live in a broken world; and our relationships and activities, as well as our sense of who we are, share in and contribute to this brokenness. We are *victims* of sin and *agents* of sin both!

To me, it is unthinkable that a congregation should abandon the prayer of *confession*, as happens in not a few congregations of our church. A student of mine reported that someone in his congregation criticised him because in one of his prayers he had spoken of the gathered congregation as *sinner*s! If, with Isaiah, Peter and Paul, we know the reality of **grace**, we will know even better the reality of **sin**, just as the experience of generosity makes us clearer about what it is to be mean and self-centred.

[D] In grace we are called

Another feature of all three readings is that the experience of **grace** creates the freedom to hear and respond to the call of God. **Isaiah**, as soon as he is declared forgiven, hears the call, 'Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?'; and says, 'Here am I; send me!' In his experience of the risen Christ, **Paul** knows both the grace of God and the call to be an apostle. 'By the grace of God I am what I am'; he is set free from guilt and free to serve. This is **Peter's** experience too: Jesus releases him from his sense of being a miserable failure and calls him to be a *catcher*, not of fish but of *people*. (In the old translation, a *fisher of men*.) He is called into the mission of Jesus; he and the others. **Luke** says simply, 'when they had brought their boats to shore, they left everything and followed him.' (5:11)

To be a believer is to be called to be a *disciple*, a learner, a follower. This is no less the case for *us* as it was in those early days. In recent decades it has been emphasised that to be baptised is not just to receive an extraordinary *gift*, but also to be **commissioned** for service. In the old days it was said to a newly baptised child that he/she was now '*engaged* to be Christ's soldier and servant.'

As baptised people, as believers, we are called to be disciples, servants who are at the same time friends. We are in a general sense servants of the gospel; *it* directs us. But the call of Christ is also specific; it is to a particular function, a particular place or community, even a particular office. It may be for a time or it may be for life. It may be, as **John Wesley** memorably put it in the *Covenant Service*, to something that suits us admirably or it may be something that is altogether against our natural inclinations. But it is to *something*!

[E] Conclusion

Do we know *who we are*, the good and the bad, the highly complex mixture of what is worthy and what is unworthy, of what causes us (and others) joy and what causes us grief? More importantly, do we know what **Paul** knew: that what we are we are by the grace of God, which comes gratuitously upon us, because of nothing and in spite of everything?

Do we know, then, that our imperfections and weaknesses, our failures and wretchedness do not have the last word? And do we know that, whether old or young, retired or just starting out, whether extroverted or introverted, confident or hesitant, we remain under the call of Christ to be his disciples?

Thanks be to God for the gift of *inexhaustible grace*, which accepts us and claims us and changes us.
