

FAREWELL IN CHRIST

Faith begins with an encounter – between the believer and God, and this encounter is usually brought about by a friend or another person. The three readings we have heard all recall encounters: the violent encounter of Stephen’s stoning, St Paul’s visit to the saints at Philippi, and Jesus with the disciples in the Upper Room. All three are heavy with meaning, and will have remained for ever in the memory of those who were there. From them faith grew. As Helen and I take our leave, the encounters that we have had here in Ely are very much in mind. These eight years have been a wonderfully rich experience: the majesty of the building, the music and the liturgy, the *Son et Lumière* evenings, Holy Week, the many opportunities for new work, particularly in relating our Benedictine heritage to life today, the challenge and delight of working on a large canvas that simply is not possible in parish ministry. But beyond all this, and undergirding it, are the many encounters we have had with so many people – the great and the good, the humble and the saintly – and we take away the many things that have been said and done, and what those encounters have meant for us.

If I pick one encounter it is the Choir Tour to Italy in 2006, when we visited the basilica of St Paul-without-the-Walls in Rome. I should have known that it was the place of St Paul’s burial, but I didn’t, and when the realisation dawned it was very moving. St

Paul is, quite simply, the greatest Christian evangelist ever, and I have been to most of the places that he visited. As I have travelled in his footsteps, my admiration for him and for what he achieved has grown. So you can imagine how I felt when I realised that I was standing next to where he lay.

His was a ministry of significant encounters. I would be surprised if his converts remembered all that he said – its hard enough for us who have it all written down, but the person they met and the impression he made on them will have stayed with them. He never stayed long in any one place, and he will have said farewell many times. As he took his leave, he bade them 'Farewell in Christ.' Not 'Good bye', but 'Fare well. May Christ be with you, and may your journey in his fellowship prosper and deepen: fare well!' To fare well in Christ is to take to heart the good news that he had brought, allowing our faith to shape our lives, and not, as so often happens, allowing our lives to shape our faith.

St Paul's encounters varied; some were challenging, as in Corinth; others were heartening, as in Thessalonica; but among them it seems the Christians at Philippi had a special place in his heart. His letter to them, written from prison in Rome, is marked by a particular affection and warm regard. As we heard in the second reading, he urges them to 'fill up [his] cup with happiness.' They will do this 'by thinking and feeling alike, with the same love for one another and a common attitude of mind. Leave no room,' he says, 'for selfish ambition and vanity, but humbly reckon others better than yourselves. Look to each others interests and not merely to your own.' (Phil 2.2-4)

To fare well in Christ is to take this to heart, as Paul had done, and he did so because his encounter with Jesus touched the depths of his soul. Twenty-five years or so before he wrote to the Philippians, Paul had watched while Stephen was stoned, and, we are told, he was ‘among those who approved of his execution.’ (Acts 8.1) It seems likely that Stephen’s willingness to die rather than forswear his faith stayed with Paul, as did Stephen’s prayer that his executioners be forgiven. As he stood there, perhaps his grim approval covered up deeper questions about Jesus that troubled his heart; even so, he can hardly have imagined that within a few years he too would suffer for his faith, and like Stephen would prefer death to forswearing Christ. Not long after Stephen’s death, Jesus literally stopped Paul in his tracks on the Damascus Road and turned his life around.

Christ became everything to St Paul, and he became Christ’s apostle, finding a new life in fellowship with the One who ‘did not snatch at equality with God, but made himself nothing, assuming the form of a slave ... who was obedient, even to the point of death, death on a cross!’ (Phil 2.-8) Paul wanted Christ to become everything to those he met, because in him we see what a human life is like when it is lived to its full potential in communion with God. Jesus models for us the love of God, he offers to us the forgiveness of God, he shows how to live in a just and peaceful fellowship with each other and with God, and he points to our ultimate destiny with God. So his name is the name above every other name, and before him every knee should bow, and every tongue confess that he is Lord. (Phil 2.9-11)

For Paul a central conviction was that in Christ he had a new life, a new identity, that could not be taken away, like a hidden treasure safe from the world. He told this to those whom he encountered, as he wrote to the Colossians, ‘Your life lies hidden with Christ in God.’ (Col 3.3) And this truth will have been evident in the way he lived his life. So much so, that he can write off all that he has prized in the past – his Hebrew lineage, his learning and status as a Pharisee, his Roman citizenship. He tells the Philippians that he counts it all as so much garbage compared with what he has gained in knowing Christ. (Phil 3.8)

The same is true for us; our true life is hid with Christ in God, and to fare well in Christ is to let that truth shape our lives. And the encounters we have, however undramatic and everyday, are the way God touches other lives with his good news. We may feel inadequate, rather like Philip in today’s Gospel reading, who wanted just a bit more proof: ‘Lord,’ he said, ‘show us the Father,’ he said, ‘and we shall be satisfied.’ (John 14.8) Jesus will have none of it; they have seen him, and that is enough. There is a touch of exasperation in his reply: ‘Have I been with you all this time, Philip, and you still do not know me? Whoever has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say “Show us the father”? Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father in me?’ (John 14.9-10) So Jesus says to us, ‘How long have you been worshipping me? How long have you listened as the Gospel is proclaimed? How long have you prayed in my name? And you still need a further assurance, another proof? Get on and use what I have given you, and you will see your faith grow.’

The life of faith is a journey made in trust. As the Jewish philosopher, Martin Buber, memorably put it, ‘there are no proofs, only witnesses.’ The truths of our faith cannot be proved, only experienced, just like love. You have to walk the journey to see if it is true, you can’t work it out theoretically, and we fare well in Christ when we do just that.

We live in times when there is both a spiritual vacuum and a greater openness to the things of the spirit. You may have seen the BBC series *The Passion*, which was screened in Holy Week; Mark Thompson, the Director-General, said that they could not have made it ten years ago. The times are changing. Despite Richard Dawkins and the other biological fundamentalists, atheism is a spent force; and there is a growing recognition that our problems are at root signs of a deep malaise of the spirit. The world needs witnesses, ordinary people, who like St Paul, know that Christ has made sense of their lives, and allow God to use them to touch the lives of others. For he is the way, and the truth, and the life. To him be the glory, now and for ever. Amen.

Farewell in Christ. I wish you all joy in the Lord.