

Meeting people on their own ground

A sermon preached by Dr Tony Lemon on 6th November 2022

Ref: *Thessalonians 2: 1-5, 13-17* *Luke 20, 27-38*

William Whyte began his sermon last week by lamenting the unhelpfulness of the lectionary readings for All Saints Day. My reaction when I looked at this week's readings was much the same! The passages we have heard from Thessalonians and Luke this morning seem rather arid to our modern ears. Paul's letter to the Thessalonians uses terms and thinks in pictures which were perfectly familiar to his readers, but utterly strange to us. Similarly the Gospel deals with burning questions for the time which seem remote from our concerns. Perhaps the most important message for us to take from these two passages is less the substance of their concerns and more the way in which Paul and especially Jesus handled them.

Paul is essentially telling the Thessalonians that they must give up their nervous, hysterical waiting for the day of the Second Coming. He denied that he had ever said that the Day of the Lord had come. Before it did, much else had to happen. First there would come an age of rebellion against God, led by 'the lawless one, the one destined for destruction' who would gather many people to him. This devil incarnate and his supporters would be utterly destroyed by Christ in a last battle after which Christ's people would be gathered to him. To us this sounds bizarre, but almost all the Eastern faiths believed in a power of evil as they believed in a power of good, and in some kind of battle between the two. When Paul refers to a restraining force that keeps the power of evil under control he may be referring to the Roman Empire – the power which kept the world from insane anarchy – this would make sense given the occasions Paul himself was saved from the fury of the mob by the justice of the Roman magistrate. When such power was removed, chaos would ensue – but a chaos from which Christ and his people would emerge victorious.

In our Gospel reading from Luke, the Sadducees are trying to ridicule belief in resurrection. Unlike the Pharisees, they denied the resurrection of the dead, the existence of spirits and the obligation of oral tradition. They accepted only the written law of the Old Testament, stressing the law of Moses rather than the prophetic books. They didn't believe in the coming of the Messiah – that would have been a disturbance of their carefully ordered lives, the lives of a wealthy minority, a governing class who were largely collaborationist with Rome – rather like what are often referred to today as a *comprador* class, the elites in many developing countries who collaborate with the forces of globalisation and Western capital to boost their own wealth and comfort, often at the expense of the mass of the people.

The Resurrection that the Sadducees denied was not what we think of as 'life after death', a non-bodily state in which people simply go on existing in some form. The Jewish view of resurrection was as a future event as a result of which God would raise all Israel, perhaps all humans, from the dead and create a new world for them to live in. The Sadducees use the case of seven brothers who, according to the law of marriage as explained in Deuteronomy, successively marry the wife of the first brother as he and the others die. Whose wife would she be at the resurrection? Jesus gave them an answer which has a permanently valid truth in it. He said that we must not think of heaven in terms of this earth. Life there will be quite different. It would save a lot of misdirected intellectual effort and not a little heartbreak if we cease to speculate on what heaven is like and leave things to the love of God.

This in effect is what most Christians do today. We know we cannot know the unknowable and we are not interested in elaborate speculation – which is why the passage is a somewhat arid one for us: it is trying to answer questions which are, for most of us, non-questions. But they were burning questions at the time of Jesus, and he tries to answer them in terms that people would understand. So he refers to Exodus 3, vv.1-6, where God says 'I am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob'. Surely it was impossible that God should be the God of the dead – in which case Abraham, Isaac and Jacob must still be alive. It was declared to be a good answer, because Jesus had met the Sadducees on their own ground and had defeated them.

Meeting people on their own ground is a valuable message for anyone who seeks to teach or communicate – and not least for us as Christians when we are called to explain our faith. Paul’s message made sense to the Thessalonians; Jesus used arguments that those who confronted him could understand. He talked to them in their own language, meeting them on their own ground and relating to their ideas and beliefs. In this way he was able to gain their interest and lead them to his truth.

We shall all be better witnesses for our faith if we can find the means to do the same in the secular world in which we live and work. In recent years many cathedrals, and some churches that receive a lot of visitors, have started to place explanatory notices around the building – not about its history and architecture, but notices that explain what each space or object is for – the font, the chancel, the altar, and so on. When I first saw these my first thought was ‘is this really necessary?’ But I quickly realised that in this secular age many of the visitors are essentially tourists who may seldom if ever attend a church service. The cathedrals are seizing a mission opportunity, explaining some of the most basic elements of worship through the spaces and objects in their glorious buildings: in the simplest way they are, in effect, meeting people on their own ground.

If we read religious or theological books, we may find them helpful in deepening our understanding and strengthening our faith. But we would never recommend them to someone who is not theologically minded – that is, the overwhelming majority of people – to someone who knows little of the Christian faith. In talking to people about Christianity we have to do what Jesus did, and meet them on their own ground.

This theme is something for us to think about in relation to what we do in church as well. We are all pleased to welcome newcomers to church, including those who are not regular churchgoers. How does our worship come across to the uninitiated? How much sense can they make of our eucharistic liturgies? These are of course important and fundamental elements of our regular worship, but are there things we can do to make them easier to follow, and easier to understand? Can we perhaps find room for other kinds of worship that are more accessible to those who are not regular churchgoers? Our new evening services on the second Sunday of the month have the potential to offer different kinds of worship, from something as traditional as Choral Evensong – so popular now in Cathedrals – to more reflective or simpler forms of worship. Our pub evenings offer another kind of opportunity for those who may not be regular churchgoers but who are interested in spiritual enquiry. These are all ways of meeting people on their own ground, as Jesus did.

More controversially, the church needs to recognise and address some of the ways in which that ground has shifted in recent years. I was really pleased to see that our Bishop, Steven Croft, has just become the first senior bishop in the Church of England to say that, after careful thought and reflection, he has changed his mind and he now believes that the church should not only bless but also conduct gay marriages. In this he has the open support of a small number of other bishops, while many others are known to support this position in private. This will of course remain a divisive issue, but the longer that the church resists change, the greater the danger of altogether losing a younger generation who simply cannot understand the church’s failure to change. As Bishop Stephen said, our understanding of human identity and sexuality has greatly developed over the last fifty years. Whilst recognising the danger of following secular change in society instead of providing spiritual leadership, the church has to recognise the need to relate its theology to modern scientific understanding. Only by doing so can we hope to meet people on their own ground.

Our Gospel shows that Jesus understood this need to meet people on their own ground – to use their own vocabulary and engage with their own ideas and values. We can all benefit, individually and collectively, from striving to follow his example.

Amen