

Trinity 1, 3rd June 2018

Deuteronomy 5:12-15; 2Cor. 4:5-12; Mark 2:23-3, 6

A fortnight ago I was enjoying a five day retreat, in the guest house of a Trappist monastery on a small island off the Welsh coast. In good weather too! Sheer bliss, including lots of silence, punctuated only by the daily round of worship, one 'input' session per day... and the seagulls.

The first day's talk was about Thomas Merton, that great reviver of the Christian tradition of silent contemplation. I'd always seen Merton as a rather daunting figure, far too rarified and holy for me. But the talk helped us see him as far more human and approachable – which was also true of the speaker himself, well informed but informal, almost diffident in an engaging way. We were all riveted – well, all but one.

After a 40-minute talk, a full 35 minutes left for discussion, that one person burst in with an angry complaint that it hadn't been an interactive session – he'd wanted space to chip in right the way through, not one lecturer spouting their own views and for their own glory! We were all stunned, at how rude and inappropriate it was. I recount this not only to illustrate the importance of listening without too much pre-judgement, but also (and mainly) because I was reminded of it when I looked up today's Epistle.

St Paul wrote this letter in the wake of some strained relations with the church at Corinth. He'd given them quite a telling-off in a previous letter, and some of them were questioning his authority and he was accused of self-glorification. So here he is at pains to show that he is not only the slave of Christ, but slave of *them*, proclaiming not himself, but Jesus Christ as Lord. And to reinforce this he gives that heartfelt catalogue of perils and pains he has gone through for their sake, yet always rescued by the grace of God – 'afflicted but not crushed, struck down but not destroyed...' and so on. He admits his fragile, commonplace nature to have this great message to convey – the treasure in clay jars, or 'earthenware pots'.

All the argument about who has authority and who is qualified to lecture or preach at them and who dares to tell them off, are all put in perspective by recognizing that (in his words) 'For it is the God who said "Let light shine out of darkness" who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.' The essential key is to allow that light to shine in our hearts; then the all-too-human rivalries and jealousies and resentments fall into place.

That light in the heart is also the key to Jesus's controversy with the Pharisees that we heard in the Gospel reading. Breaking the Sabbath law was technically an extremely serious offence – it could in theory be punishable by death. If Jesus and his disciples were guilty of it, that would at the very least discredit him as a serious teacher. Just to pluck heads of grain in passing was acceptable (maybe not to the farmer), but in the Torah it was expressly forbidden on the Sabbath, except in cases of extreme need. The disciples presumably were not only picking the ears, but also rubbing them to get the grain. So that was two Sabbath offences – reaping and threshing. The example of King David is not strictly accurate as a precedent, but points in the right direction.

Jesus concludes with the shocking assertion that the Sabbath was made for humans, not humans for the Sabbath. Shocking, except for our OT reading from Deuteronomy: after the list of everyone, including male and female slaves, ox and donkey and resident alien, who must do no work on the Sabbath, it continues ... 'so that your male and female slave may rest as well as you. Remember that you were a slave in Egypt, and the Lord your God brought you out from there ... therefore the Lord your God commanded you to keep the Sabbath day.' It is not for God's benefit, but for the sake of hardworking ~~the~~ people (and animals), and to celebrate their liberation. There are ancient rabbinical writings confirming that the Sabbath is God's gift to his people – far from an extra burden to bear, it's a blessing. So Jesus was not being subversive, though the implications of this are enormous, starting with that healing in the synagogue. Sabbath as a day not to do harm but to do good, not to kill but to save life.

Jesus looked round with anger, grieved at the hardness of heart of those wanting to condemn him for healing the man on the Sabbath. This is the nub of the ongoing conflict about the very nature of religious norms and rules and customs: are they life-giving, life-enhancing, or the opposite; do they promote compassion, or stifle it. These are live questions for us today. The criteria are not to be found in any set of Yes/No answers, found by looking up in scripture or a catechism. They can give guidance, as can the wisdom and experience of other people; but there is no substitute for informed, prayerful conscience, open to that shining into our hearts which gives the light of the knowledge of God in the face of Jesus Christ.

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