

Chrism Eucharist Holy Trinity Brussels April 2017

The Call of Samuel and the Anointing of Jesus

We gather in this special eucharist to recall that we accepted the responsibilities of ministry out of our love for Jesus Christ; we re-commit ourselves to share the peace and love of the lord Jesus; and we ask the Lord to bless us with the fulness of his love so that we will be more worthy of the calling entrusted to us. We are here to re-connect with the divine source of love which is the wellspring of our ministry; to enjoy for a precious few hours the love and fellowship of each other; and to be commissioned again to spread the love of Jesus abroad in the church and the world, in the context of contemporary Europe.

Our gospel reading narrates a loving encounter: the meeting of Jesus with an unnamed woman at the home of Simon the Pharisee. It is the first of two or three or even four anointings depending on how you count them, that Jesus receives at the hands of women.¹ Each anointing is a dramatic embodiment of loving intent and action. But there is a shadow side to the story, for St. Luke paints a sharp contrast between the love shown to Jesus by the unnamed woman and the lack of love he receives from Simon.

The woman's actions are extravagant. Middle Eastern hospitality suggested water for the guest's feet, a kiss of greeting on the cheek or hand, and the anointing of the guest's head with olive oil. Simon supplies none of these. The woman, by contrast, washes his feet with her tears. She has no towel but uses her own hair to dry them. She does not kiss his cheek or hand but his feet. She does not anoint his head but his feet and not with household olive oil but with costly perfume. All of her actions are performed on Jesus's feet, that unseemly, unclean part of the body – accentuating all the more the extraordinary and humble nature of her attendance to his needs. The personal, warm, extravagant love of the woman contrasts with the formal, cold and - in a holy week context, you might even say deadly hospitality offered by the Pharisee.

In his powerful film, "I, Daniel Blake," the social critic Ken Loach, contrasts two ways in which care is offered to the vulnerable. The action of the film takes place in Newcastle Upon Tyne, and concerns Daniel, a carpenter unable to work after suffering a heart attack, and a single mother called Katie who has moved up to the North East of England from London. Daniel and Katie both find themselves cast on the mercy of the benefits system. The rules of the system - applied more or less intelligently, and more or less compassionately – inexorably grind both of them down into lower and lower levels of existence. Daniel loses his self-esteem and most of his possessions. Katie eventually goes into prostitution to provide for her children. It is a bleak story.

But a contrast is offered between the benefits system and the local foodbank. The foodbank, we presume attached to a church, is staffed not by professionals like the job centre, but by well-meaning volunteers. It is housed not like the JobCentre in a new concrete and glass building with computers but a rather shabby brick-built hall. To our surprise, at the foodbank, Daniel and Katie are treated with extraordinary courtesy, gentleness and respect. The well-meaning

¹ Subsequent anointings at the home of Simon the Leper, at the home of Mary and Martha and in the garden tomb.

elderly ladies play with Katie's young children. Katie is helped to choose her food, which the volunteers describe as her 'shopping'. And the staff respond with compassion not anger when she inappropriately breaks open a tin of food and starts to eat the contents. For Daniel and Katie, trapped in a bureaucratic and increasingly deadly iron cage of state care, the foodbank offers an unexpected encounter with Christian love and compassion.

The ministry of Jesus as recorded in the gospels is a whole series of loving encounters. Over recent Sundays we have been looking at successive chapters in John's gospel in which Jesus encounters the Samaritan Woman at Jacob's Well, Nicodemus, who comes to Jesus by night, and Mary and Martha of Bethany who come to Jesus in desperation following the death of Lazarus. The gospels are low on theory. If we turn to them in search of a rational divine plan to save the world we will be disappointed. And in the face of a world which routinely classes individuals into groups, then treats the groups as objects of our own plans and designs, Jesus steadfastly insists on treating individual people as individual people. That is why 'love' is at the heart of the gospel – because love is the highest expression of the feelings which arise when individuals encounter and care for one another in the best possible way.

One of the pernicious effects of rising populism in Europe, and of the way this has been expressed in the Brexit vote in the UK in particular, is the way that it has divided groups people against each other: young vs. old, educated vs. less educated, cities vs. provinces. Various attempts have been made to understand and explain these divisions. One of the most interesting and provocative has been that offered by David Goodhart, the founder and former editor of Prospect Magazine.

Goodhart argues that the key faultline in Britain and elsewhere in Europe is between the Somewheres and the Anywheres. The Somewheres are rooted in a specific place or community, usually a small town or in the countryside, socially conservative, often less educated. On the other hand, the Anywheres are footloose, often urban, socially liberal and university educated. Goodhart cites polling evidence to show that Somewheres make up roughly half the population, with Anywheres accounting for 20% to 25% and the rest classified as "Inbetweeners". Goodhart suggests that Brexit should be understood as a rebellion by the people from 'Somewhere' against the people from 'Anywhere'. Whether or not you completely go along with Goodhart, it is certainly true that there is mistrust between those who hold these two different sets of values, and that the effect of a referendum has been to crystallise that mistrust into division and anger.

Goodhart's provocative analysis made me wonder about Jesus. Was he a Somewhere or was he an Anywhere? He was born in Bethlehem and grew up in Nazareth, although for a while he lived in exile in Egypt. His ministry began at home in the synagogues around the Sea of Galilee. He seemed at times reluctant to stray beyond the lost sheep of the house of Israel. Yet, and especially as St. Luke tells it, his ministry grew to embrace sinners, Samaritans, Gentiles. And in his parting words he exhorted his disciples to go out into all the nations. Perhaps Jesus was a man rooted Somewhere with a Mission that extended Anywhere.

Then I wonder about us, his Diocese in Europe followers. Put your hand up if you are currently living and ministering in the town or city in which you were born and brought up. We, in Goodhart's terms, are Anywhere people, but we minister Somewhere. In fact we minister in the sociological conjunction of the anywhere and the somewhere – we work between the transnational and the local. And that, I believe, is a crucial place to be.

It means we're in the business of creating spiritual homes for the spiritually, and sometimes physically, homeless. We are to live graciously, respectfully and gratefully as pilgrims and sojourners, praying for the peace and prosperity of the cities where we find ourselves. We are so to make ourselves at home that others can find their home alongside and with us. We are to build communities where people may experience the love of Christ deeply, perhaps at key moments in their lives, perhaps at times and places where they are especially vulnerable. And, because we are the church, that love will be offered informally, spontaneously, freely, daringly and personally. And in our contemporary world there is almost nothing more precious than that.

I could finish there. But before I close I can't resist some reference to our Old Testament reading. In 1 Samuel Chapter 3 the Lord calls the little boy Samuel. We read that 'the word of the Lord was rare in those days; there were not many visions'. But in the stillness and the peace of the temple, Samuel hears the voice of the Lord calling him. It is a calling which will sustain Samuel through a long, illustrious and dangerous life – as he goes on to anoint Saul and then Saul's rival David as Israel's King.

You could say that in our time the word of the Lord is also rare, at least vision and visions seem difficult to clarify. There is no shortage of communication – we have never been busier talking to each other on gadgets of one kind and another. But it could be that the level of background noise is so high that hearing the word of the Lord is harder than it was. So opportunities like this to be still for a while, to gather in the Lord's house and to listen are important.

Because, the fact is that a sense of calling remains critically important for those who would minister on the Lord's behalf. I spend a good part of my time involved with clergy appointments, and the first criterion and first question about any candidate is: 'do we think God is calling them to this ministry?' Not just, 'Is this person skilled?' 'Are they well qualified?' 'Are they appropriately experienced?' But are they the right person for this place, this particular context. Are they called to be *here*?

For any of us, without a sense of calling, our ministry will drift, we will start to lose our way, we will lack the perseverance needed to see the job through to its conclusion. So we gather today to hear again God's call to us, to reaffirm our dedication to our vocation and to rekindle our love. As we bless these oils for use in anointing others, I pray that we today know the anointing of the Holy Spirit. May we be drawn anew into the loving circle of the Holy Trinity. So that we will again be refreshed and strengthened for the work of sharing the love of Jesus with those in our care. Amen.

+Robert Innes

Tuesday 11th April 2017