

BOUND TOGETHER IN CHRIST'S LOVE

ISAIAH 62:1-5; 1 COR 12:1-11; JOHN 2:1-11

Introduction

People sometimes ask me a question which goes something like this: “did you always want to be a vicar?” or “what made you decide to go into the church?” So I answer by saying that it is a calling, and one which I first heard when I was 12 years old in India. In many ways it is not about wanting to do a certain job or deciding to pursue a particular career. It is about realising the God is calling you to serve him in a particular way. So, yes, from an early age I knew that I was to become a Minister, and yes, I decided to respond to that calling. However, what is not always understood is that it started with God and took my response to God’s initiative to develop into my vocation, my calling to be ordained and serve the Lord in this way. That sense of calling never really left me until, about 10 years later, as a student I began to test it out, to decide to offer for ordination in the Church of England. So it was that, after further training, I began my ordained ministry in Birmingham in 1985. What has also grown clearer to me in recent years is that I am Anglican minister because my parents were Methodist missionaries in South India. Although my father went out to India as a Methodist probationer, he was ordained as a presbyter in the C.S.I and growing up as a young man, I felt very much at home in churches that had more of an Anglican flavour. That led me on to offering for ordination through the CofE, but I have always looked to work in an ecumenical setting because I was confirmed into the united church of south India. If my parents hadn’t been what they were, I might not have been what I am!

Turning Points

For each of us there come turning points in our life. After that particular experience you are never the same. Perhaps you remember the day you started school or when you moved to a new school. Maybe you recall meeting your best friend or your life-partner – the time or place when you realised that you were in love. The day you started work may be etched in your memory or the time when you were promoted or given special responsibility. I enjoy listening to programmes like *Desert Island Discs* or *Private Passions* because they give us insights into the way music has such a profound effect on the life of the person being interviewed. Perhaps you recall the first time a cultural experience struck you in a new way and you’ve been passionate about it since: it may be football, or music, art, literature or the theatre. Less positively, for you there may have been a time when your life was changed because of something to do with your health or your significant relationships. Great

or small in their importance, these turning points had a long-term significance in your life which you may have only half-realised at the time. Some people may give a secular explanation of why those days were important. Others say that God opened their eyes to some new truth, that this was a spiritual experience.

Covenant and True Vine

In the Methodist tradition at the start of the New Year a Covenant service is held. Indeed, it is also kept in some of the other churches in our team. It is a point of rededication and is meant to be preceded by proper personal preparation so that the prayer of dedication is not just an empty set of words. The Covenant service is so called because it reminds us of the whole way in which we are able to relate to God. Our readings from the Bible today are snapshots of the growing understanding of God's people what covenant means. Moses and the children of Israel entered into a solemn and binding contract, a covenant, in which they promised obedience and God promised to be with them, provide for and protect them. Because they were a nomadic society that depended on livestock, animal blood was very much an everyday thing for them, even though we might think it sounds a bit off-putting. Blood was revered and its symbolic treatment was important as a sign and seal.

The prophet Jeremiah challenged his people centuries later, to renew their commitment to God. He urged each person to take the covenant seriously and to heart. The days are coming, he prophesied, when a real covenant of the heart would be a reality. Christians believe that eventually this was offered in Jesus and through the Holy Spirit. The New Covenant or Testament came in Jesus and was sealed with his blood shed on the cross. St Paul urged his fellow believers to present themselves as spiritual sacrifices to God, allowing their inner lives to be transformed in order to stay in this new covenant.

The gospel gives us the words of Jesus and the way he loved to use pictures to explain spiritual matters. Remain in my love just as the grapes have to remain attached to the vine in order to receive its life. Last year Jeanette and I went to an English vineyard where we learnt about how vines grow and how the variety of grape has different characteristics depending on the rootstock and what is grafted onto it. The taste and character of the grape depended very much on being part of the vine and on the soil it was rooted into. Viticulture is a great skill and the tending of vines, including their pruning, is vital to the success of the harvest and the health of each vine. So Jesus used this as an illustration of how vital it is that each of his followers remain connected to him and part of the wider vine which is the Church.

Conversion

Earlier I invited you to think about a life-changing experience in your own personal growth. I mentioned a number of things that might have been very important in your life. I even mentioned whether the day or moment could be explained from a secular or a spiritual point of view. But I didn't mention something which I very much hope is the most profound or important development in your life: that of becoming a Christian. For some people and in some Christian traditions this has to be a very specific thing – a definite point of conversion when you respond to a call to repentance and faith. Some people call it being saved. Other Christians take the long-term view, being convinced that there has never been a time when they didn't believe, that they were brought up in the faith, and that their whole life has been a story of gradually becoming more and more converted. Whichever way, today's gospel reading challenges us to be more conscious of the reason why we follow Christ.

I sometimes think that we treat the Church more like a social club than we realise. We like doing the same kinds of things such as singing hymns or joining in worship. We sign up, and perhaps agree to do duties or go on a committee and we give or raise funds to keep the club going. We join the Church because we are a certain type and we find similar people there. Whilst that may be true in many ways, and certainly a social life at church does play an important role, are we not also to be the fellowship of those who have turned to Christ and seek to follow him in our everyday lives? Are we not meant to be a body which expresses that same call of the Lord to the world, to those around us? Are we not also a movement of those who challenge what may be unjust or violent in our world? We may have club-like qualities to our belonging, but we are to be far more than a special interest group! We are actually an important sign, a sign of the presence and reality of Christ in our world. We are a local sign, and when we gather, listen to the Word of God and share the sacramental meal of the communion, we embody the presence of Christ in our local community. Just as the elders of Israel ate and drank in the awesome presence of almighty God, so we are in God's presence as we gather to worship, hear the Word and share in the communion.

Conclusion

We have been thinking about turning points in our lives as we have recalled the teaching of Jesus about abiding in him. Deciding to follow Christ does not mean an easy life for the believer. The covenant prayer expresses well the way we give ourselves over to God and what he thinks is best for us. But you are never on your own once you have begun to respond. The covenant service is not just about giving up our lives to God in a one-sided act of self-sacrifice. It is much more about entering into God's love and learning that life given to him is always life given back a hundred fold, and life on into eternity! As we celebrate this covenant service and say the prayer of commitment to God let us resolve to live more deeply drawing on the life that Jesus' seeks to live through us. Let us resolve to stay connected to the vine, which is the fellowship of believers, the Church, and let us renew our faith and trust in the one who promises us his presence, guidance and protection. Through this covenant we can live for God and work for him in this world.