

Discipleship – Epiphany 2 2012

Genesis 1 vv 1-5 p3, Ps 139, Acts 19 vv 1-7 p1115, Mark 1 vv 4-11 p1002

I felt a bit weird saying Morning Prayer in Cuxton Church on Tuesday morning. 10th January is the anniversary of the beheading of the Archbishop of Canterbury, William Laud, in 1645. Laud had been Rector of Cuxton for a few months in 1610. I thought he might well have prayed the same prayers I was praying (in the same words even) on the same spot on which I was saying them 402 years later or at least very close to it. One of the two choir stalls at St Michael's is supposed to be Jacobean and it might well have been put there by Laud. It was the kind of thing he would have done.

So I felt something of a connection and naturally I wondered if I would be ready to be beheaded for my faith if it came to it? Would I be prepared to die for Christ? After all, He died for me and many of His most faithful followers have become martyrs. What would I do if I were given the choice between denying Jesus and saving my life?

Of course, it was much more complicated than that at the time of the English Civil War. Both sides claimed to be Christians. It wasn't just a matter of being martyred for the Christian faith. Laud and others on both sides of the conflict could be said to have been martyred for a particular interpretation of the Christian faith – for being Anglicans rather than Presbyterians or Independents or *vice versa*. Not only do I have to ask myself would I be prepared to die for Jesus, but also would I be prepared to die for the right to be Church of England rather than, say, Roman Catholic or United Reformed? I think the right answer is that I should be prepared to die as a Christian if necessary, but not for one particular interpretation of Christianity against another. But does that mean that I ought just to give in and believe doctrines that I don't think are true simply to avoid the possibility of conflict with other Christians? Or should I pretend to believe what I don't believe and live to fight another day?

It is also more complicated than a simple story of a good man accepting martyrdom rather than relinquish his faith, because William Laud was not a particularly good man. In fact many histories of the Civil War cast Laud as one of the villains. He was arrogant, over-sensitive, impatient of dissent (in every sense), an inept politician and, worst of all, a cruel man. On the positive side of his character, Laud was a scholar and devoted to education, a faithful priest and devoted to the Church. He did a great deal for the University of Oxford, reforming its statutes and extending its areas of study. He imposed discipline on the Church and insisted on things being done *decently and in order*. This was part of the problem. What was meant by *decently and in order*? Laud thought it meant bishops, beautiful church buildings, traditionally dressed clergy in surplices, the communion table situated at the east end of the church (as it is now and as it had been in the Middle Ages) not longways in the middle of the chancel (as it had been in Tudor and Jacobean times), an orderly service conducted according to the Book of Common Prayer. Puritans thought that Laud was a closet Roman Catholic trying to return the Church of England to obedience to Rome. This was emphatically not true of Laud, who maintained against Rome that Christians are only required to believe what can be proved from the Bible. He was a good Anglican, but he lived in troubled times when people were fearful and suspicious of one another. You and I

may have strong views on all these issues. We might debate them vigorously with one another and with members of other churches, but I hope we can all agree that it would never be right to fight a war over them, that it would never be right to cease to love fellow Christians with whom we might disagree, that it could only be as a very last resort that the Church should be divided into different denominations because Christians could not agree to worship and to serve God together.

Where Laud was quite definitely wrong was that he was prepared to torture and imprison those who opposed him. He was wrong in principle. It was also a mistake in political terms. He made people hate him and the reforms he was trying to bring in. He stirred up such enmity against himself that, when his enemies had the upper hand, they passed a Bill of Attainder in Parliament, which meant that he could be executed, even though there was insufficient evidence against him to convict him in the courts.

In the C17 there was a ferment of ideas, both political and religious. The Civil War has sometimes been described as the first modern war for political liberation and sometimes as the last reformation war of religion. Of course it was both a religious war and a political war. There were good people on both sides, highly principled people, and it was also a bloody tragedy. More Englishmen died per head of population in the Civil War even than in the First World War. It must have been devastating for the people who lived in those times.

Three points strike me.

- Never mind about bad people. Good people can very quickly agree on what they are contending for: such things as liberty and justice; faith, hope and charity.
- Never mind about bad people, good people can sincerely hold very different ideas about how to achieve liberty and justice; and faith, hope and charity. You can sincerely believe that republicanism or monarchy, that free trade or protectionism, that socialism or conservatism, that Anglicanism, Catholicism or Calvinism, are the sure way to usher in the new Jerusalem.
- Never mind about bad people, when good people disagree about economics or politics or especially religion they very quickly forget all about liberty and justice, faith hope and charity and scrap like wild animals.

So I wondered what I would have done if I had lived in C17? Would I have supported King or Commonwealth? What kind of a Christian would I have been? Church of England or one of the more fervent independent sects? Would I have been prepared to die for my religious or political beliefs? How ruthless would I have been prepared to be in defending them? Would I have become a soldier? If I had been in a position of power, would I have imprisoned, tortured or executed my opponents? I have suffered for my beliefs – in particular for my belief that it is our duty to hold a service of Holy Communion in both parish churches every Sunday – but I have never been threatened with decapitation. (Even the PCC wouldn't go that far.) I have been accused of being ruthless in dealing with my opponents, but that usually means me refusing to join in discussions with people who I think mean to bully me into agreeing to what I believe to be wrong. I've never thought about torturing or

imprisoning even the most determined opponents of my parish policies. So what did it mean to be a Christian in C17 century? What would you have done?

And what does it mean now to be a Christian? In the ASB the theme for this Sunday was *Revelation - The First Disciples*. Common Worship seems to have retained the same theme for Epiphany 2, though Common Worship doesn't deal explicitly in themes. What did it mean to be a Christian disciple in C1 or C17? What does it mean to be a Christian today? We don't face the challenges that Peter and Andrew and James and John faced. Nor do we face the challenges that Christians faced in C17. Neither do we have the same opportunities that they had. We have our own challenges, our own opportunities. We have the same certainties as they had, but maybe different perplexities. What does it mean for you and me to be Christians in C21? I'm sure we should be no less fervent. We are still called to love the Lord our God with all our heart, mind, soul and strength. We should hold back no more of ourselves than they did. We are still called to take up our cross and follow Him. Obviously, if we think through what it means to love our neighbours as ourselves, it does not mean to persecute or to fight against or even to turn our backs on those with whom we disagree. We are in one communion and fellowship with those who have gone before us in the faith. Peter and Andrew, James and John and William Laud and the prophet Samuel and all the other saints are our brothers and sisters in Christ. They faced trials and tribulations in their lifetime. They made mistakes. They had to work out their own salvation in the world as it was for them. Through the grace of God, they each played their own part in God's plan for the salvation of the world and now reign in glory as kings and priests. At the end of St John's Gospel, after the Resurrection, on another fishing trip, Peter asks Jesus what the beloved disciple, the apostle John, will do. Jesus' reply to Peter is *Follow thou me*. You and I might wonder about William Laud and other Christians in history and other people in the Church today but what Jesus says to each one of us is the same thing He said to Peter, *Follow thou me*. That is what you and I have to work out in the world in which God has been pleased to call us. *Follow thou me*.

ASB Collect Epiphany 2:

Almighty God, by whose grace alone we are accepted and called to your service: strengthen us by your Holy Spirit and make us worthy of our calling, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.