

8 February 2015

Epiphany 5

Readings: Isaiah 40:21-31, **1 Corinthians 9:16-23**, Mark 1:29-39

ALL THINGS TO ALL MEN

We sometimes forget, because of the order in which the books of the New Testament appear in the Bible, that the Letters come before the Gospels. It isn't a question of priority, but one of timing and audience. The Letters were written before the Gospels, and with a different purpose.

C S Lewis wrote a very striking introduction to J B Phillips' 1947 translation '*Letters to young churches*' explaining why it is so important to remember this order of events. He wrote about the common misconception that "Jesus preached a kindly and simple religion (found in the Gospels) and that St Paul afterwards corrupted it into a cruel and complicated religion (found in the Letters). But this is really quite untenable ... The Letters are, for the most part, the earliest Christian documents we possess. The gospels come later...

"God's act (the Incarnation, the Crucifixion and the Resurrection) comes first: the earliest theological analysis of it comes in the Letters: then, when the generation who had known the Lord was dying out, the Gospels were composed to provide for believers a record of the great act and of some of the Lord's sayings."

J B Phillips himself said that the language of the Letters (the Greek he was translating from) is full of urgency and excitement because it shows the first Christians struggling to work out what it meant in practice to live a faithful life – individually and communally – in a world that was ignorant, indifferent or hostile. Describing the process of translation in a radio interview, he said the material is so extraordinarily alive that he felt "like an electrician re-wiring an ancient house without being able to turn off the mains".

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In the letter read to us earlier, St Paul is writing back to the church he had founded at Corinth with guidance on important issues that had come up in the two years since he had left them to continue his travels. As in all the Letters, only one side of this correspondence is preserved in the New Testament, but there are clues to what must have been in the letters he was replying to: the difficulty we have now is separating advice that is specific to those people at that time in that society from advice that is so universally wise that we should be following it now.

The Corinthians had misunderstood an earlier letter in which he said they should not associate with immoral people. He explained that he meant immoral people who

claimed to be faithful members of the church: if you tried to avoid immoral people altogether in a place like Corinth, you would never cross your threshold.

Members of Chloe's household had brought news about divisions and grievances, which Paul advised them to deal with themselves rather than bringing lawsuits in the public courts.

The congregation had sent a delegation to ask questions about marriage, divorce, food and interactions with the society outside the Church.

In the course of answering these questions, St Paul left us with words and phrases so evocative that they have found their way into the liturgy we use for our services. When David prays the Eucharistic prayer later in this service, he will be quoting what St Paul wrote to the Corinthians to remind them of the origin of the Lord's Supper, as evidently their communal meals were becoming rowdy and disrespectful.

Chapter 13 is particularly rich in language so memorable that it has passed into common usage even beyond the Christian church.

"Though I speak with the tongues of men and angels, but do not have love, I am but a sounding brass or a tinkling cymbal."

"When I was a child, I spoke as a child ... when I became a man I put away childish things."

"Now we see in a mirror, dimly; but then, face to face. Now I know only in part: but then I shall know fully, even as I am known."

But what are we to make of the phrase in chapter 9: "**I have become all things to all men**"? I think of it as a dangerous phrase because it doesn't sound like something we expect a saint to say. We probably associate it with weakness and lack of principle.

I can think of one or two politicians to whom it might be applied, especially in the interminable run-up to the next general election. Their advisers will push them into the television studio to say something that small businesses will go for, hoping we've forgotten that the previous week they were saying the opposite in search of the trades unionist's vote, or the youth vote, or the elderly vote. Or whichever vote the polls suggest is underperforming for them. When it's a question of getting back into power, anything goes.

Is St Paul saying that anything goes in proclaiming the faith? That we simply adapt the message to the audience? It's an important question for evangelism and the cause of some controversy. There are church marketing professionals who advise the biggest Evangelical churches on "contextualisation", quoting that dangerous phrase from 1 Corinthians 9 as their justification. The accusation made against them by conservative Protestants is that in trying to be all things to all men they disguise and compromise

the essential Gospel message in order to create worship experiences and church social activities that may be attractive but are barely distinguishable from those of the secular world.

The controversy extends to evangelism between cultures: a couple of years ago, Wycliffe Bible Translators came under fire for their use of Muslim idioms in Bibles intended for use in countries whose culture and heritage is mainly Islamic. The problem lies in describing God as “the Father” and Jesus as “the Son of God”. In our Christian tradition, these are more than figures of speech; they are essential to our theology.

But, like it or not, these idioms don’t work against an Islamic cultural background; in fact, they are offensive and even blasphemous because family relationship words always imply something physical. Any equivalent local expression such as “divine prince” loses much of its power if it needs an explanatory footnote every time it appears. And, as Wycliffe found, it exposes the translator to the accusation that the message is being diluted.

So what do you say to the Inuit about The Good Shepherd, since they have no sheep? Do you teach them about sheep, hang pictures of sheep on the walls of their Sunday schools, and leave those much-loved Bible stories unchanged? Or do the translators search for an equivalent expression to do with hunting seals or herding reindeer? If they do that, their critics will say they are straying from the true path; if they don’t, then Christian evangelism can become a form of cultural imperialism.

J B Phillips started work on his translations because the young people in his post-war London parish found the King James Bible remote and only responded when he re-told the stories in language that they could relate to.

“Woe betide me if I do not proclaim the Gospel”, says St Paul, and it is clear to me that in proclaiming the Gospel you have to start where people are.

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There is a second, and deeper, meaning to that dangerous phrase. In saying “I have become all things to all people” he is expressing his willingness not to compromise his message but to compromise his own pride and his own identity.

This educated Jew and Roman citizen had been a bit of a thug in his youth, enthusiastically joining in the persecution of the Christian minority that so troubled the Roman provincial governors.

But then came his dramatic conversion on the road to Damascus – his vision of Christ, his temporary blindness, his baptism by Ananias.

The before and after contrast is striking, and when he answered his doubters and critics he had no hesitation in telling his own story to underline his credentials as one who had not only the obligation but also the right to proclaim the Gospel: “Look at what I was – and look at what I am now.”

He no longer relied on the privileges of race, circumcision, citizenship; they meant nothing to God and they now meant nothing to him, except where they could open doors to his evangelism. He could address both Jews and Gentiles because of his Jewish-Roman background. He had come to worship and serve the *crucified Messiah*, an idea once so absurd to him as to seem “a stumbling-block to Jews and foolishness to the Gentiles”. He no longer believed the Gentiles were outside the covenant that God had made with Israel but that Jews and Gentiles were united in Jesus as the people of God.

None of us can tell such a striking before-and-after story as St Paul could. None of us has made such a journey from persecutor to proclaimer. Most of us indeed, will spend more time trying to live the Christian life than trying to put it into words, though living a Christian life is no less a proclamation of the Gospel.

All of us have one thing in common with St Paul – we stand in two worlds. Today I am a secular man in a religious context; tomorrow, I will be a religious man in a secular context. I may never be able completely to dissolve the boundaries between my Sunday context and my Monday context, but that is what the example of St Paul teaches me, and it is what I must always try to do.

Let us pray:

Heavenly Father, Bless and encourage us as we contemplate the remarkable life and work of your servant St Paul, through whom the Gospel shone and still shines in all the world. May the sacrament that we share this morning fill us with some of that same love and energy, and may we follow him in bearing witness to your truth in everything we say and do this coming week , in the name of Jesus Christ our Lord, AMEN

PAUL BECK