

He Set Himself to Teach Them at Some Length
16th Sunday, Year B
19 July 2009

Travelling around Britain on study leave I noticed a growing deficit feeling developing each time I took part in Sunday worship. Trying to put it into words I came up with the phrase, “Scriptural starvation.” In church after church they only had two readings, an epistle and then the gospel, at the Sunday Eucharist. The effect of this was that you hardly ever heard from the Old Testament, so that the Jewish grounding of our faith, without which it doesn’t really make sense, became a missing dimension. And the psalms, the cry of the heart in prayer and praise, the people’s response to that opening reading, disappeared off the radar screen.

Talking to my colleagues back home I discover that not a few of them are pursuing a similar slash and burn policy when it comes to the amount of Scripture read out on Sunday morning. “We don’t have many good readers, and besides our people have a limited concentration span,” they tell me. Then they go on to say, “I don’t want the liturgy to get too wordy.”

Has the power of the spoken word died in our midst I wonder as I listen to this? I have commented before on the dearth of good preaching these days, stemming in large part from the absence of feed back from listeners about the quality of what they hear from the pulpit. But can’t we even read aloud a couple of paragraphs from our sacred stories without boring the pants off each other?

As church people retreat from the challenge of bringing alive the sacred words as a collective listening experience they often fall back on technology and music. Power point presentations sometimes accompany the preaching, the presenter a slave to the speed or slowness of the sparse, lean summary points as they roll out on the screen. The nuances and the textures of the spoken word disappear as we get 5 points on sin and 7 points on grace. Singing and music often fill the gaps where Scripture ought to be. The flow of the liturgy is paused, lured into cul de sacs, or derailed completely by concert performances, or by lots of singing, usually of a sentimental nature. What else is there to do when the feel good factor reigns supreme?

“He set himself to teach them at some length.”
Withdrawing to a lonely place for a day off Jesus and the disciples are pursued by a crowd suffering from spiritual starvation. They have been short changed by their spiritual leaders, just as the prophet Jeremiah predicted would happen when he pronounced doom on the shepherds of Israel. So great is the people’s hunger for words of life that they are prepared to walk a long way to this desolate place away from shelter or sustenance. Here is the test of a spiritual leader. Has he got something to say, and can he communicate it with conviction and power and winsomeness on demand?

But think for a moment about the audience. Sabbath-by-Sabbath they have been soaked in the words of the Torah. In the Synagogue every Saturday morning the sacred scrolls have been unrolled and they have heard God’s words chanted or read aloud. The Scriptures

are, as it were, the language in which God communicates with us, and this audience has been taught the language all their lives. Whatever the other deficiencies of their spiritual formation they have been thoroughly prepared and back grounded in this respect for what Jesus is about to teach them.

In some churches, deeply influenced by the liturgical movement, the altar and the lectern are on either side of the sanctuary exactly in line with one another, with neither having central place. It is a dramatic way of indicating the balanced diet of Word and Sacrament that is on offer in their Sunday worship. The Vatican 2 documents captured this insight perfectly when they spoke of the Eucharist as the table of “both the word of God and the body of Christ.”

Next Sunday we will be hearing how Jesus miraculously fed the crowd. Today we are hearing about the way he taught them first. So there is a double dimension about the way he set about meeting their needs. In like manner he meets our needs as we come to the Eucharist every Sunday morning.

It is a privilege to have the full four readings of first testament, psalm, epistle and gospel. But we have work to do in appropriating this richness. We need to meet our readers half way by attending to what they say with an active listening that is as attentive as if we were at the theatre. Our readers, I know, have prepared beforehand by mulling over the words, seeking to understand them at the deepest level, and make them their own. I remember watching Professor Chadwick reading a lesson at Evensong at Oxford Cathedral. As he kept eye contact with us throughout it was as though he had written these words himself,

knew them thoroughly, and was eager to share them with us from the heart almost by heart.

Our listening is a shared experience and that adds to its power in the same way that a shared silence generates a collective spiritual energy. Listening attentively together we hear things in the familiar sacred stories that we hadn't noticed before. Yes, this is a story that is about us too as its resonance's pick up on our situation now.

That means that it is not helpful to retreat into a private space where we analyse the text stripping it into its constituent bits with our rationality alone. For this reason we do not provide pew Bibles or announce the chapters and verses of the readings. That can and should be done at home since every Christian is a student of the Bible. No, as we hear the announcement, "a reading from the prophet Jeremiah," we are engaged with a freshness and immediacy that aims to make us contemporaneous with the text as though Jeremiah himself was reading it out to us having just written it.

Our readers have the capacity to make the spoken word come alive for us as they read with energy and interest, with colour and variation in their intonation. A religion of the Word must be able to make words interesting. Our sense of expectation, of alert attention, of engaged intuition and memory will encourage the readers and draw the best out of them, particularly if we give them feed back afterwards about their efforts.

What we do together in this first half of the Service makes it in all its simplicity interesting and engaging.

And that is as it should be – for the deep theological truth is that the Word that is read out and preached on in this part of the Service is the same Word that the Holy Spirit takes and uses to change the bread and wine into the body and blood of Christ. It is the same Word that the Spirit alights on and uses as words of healing in the ministry of healing. It is all a unity. And we have it within us to give these words of God great power as they are spoken among us.