

**Distinctively Christian**  
**21<sup>st</sup> Sunday, YearB**  
**23 August 2009**

There is a story that touches and troubles me from the time of the birth of Christianity in Russia. Boris and Gleb were royal princes in the line of succession in the kingdom of Muscovy. When they embraced the gospel they were particularly struck by its teaching about non-violence and the forgiveness of enemies. So when ambitious plotters ambushed them with murderous intent they ordered their followers to flee, and allowed themselves to be butchered without resisting. Now no one remembers what thug ruled over Muscovy in those years, but Boris and Gleb are honoured as the founding saints of Christianity in Russia. Clearly they were impressive Christians, but I am left uneasily wondering - did they take things too far?

What is for sure is that they stood out from their surrounding culture. They were distinctively different. In my Father's country law firm there were Christians who managed to do that too. The scarves they wore around their head showed them to be members of the closed brethren. At lunchtime, and at morning and afternoon teatime, they refused to eat or drink or socially mix with the other office workers. They certainly got the message across that Christians are different, but in a rather unattractive, off putting way.

At theological college one of the more impressive visiting speakers was a Frenchman who worked in a dye factory in Leeds. He was one of the little brothers of Jesus, a low key outfit, whose members take jobs in, and live in the less glamorous parts of the world's cities. He just worked away on the factory floor, got to

know the workers, and went home at night to the modest house he shared with a few other of the brothers, where they had a meal, and spent an hour in silent prayer in front of the blessed sacrament. The Frenchman talked about the broken, chaotic lives of his work mates, and how as a result of sticking around with them for a while they had elected him as their shop steward. There was a dry, irony about the man. When the principal, an Oxbridge man, enthused about this witness to religion among the smoke stacks the reply came back, "Actually, I enjoy living like this."

Of course, we don't live in an industrial suburb, nor do we live under religious vows. We belong to a mainstream Church that is into embracing the what is rather than heroic isolating witness. So it is a challenge for us to hear that call from Joshua to be a distinctive people, to identify with that small remnant around Jesus who are the only ones who will keep company with him when he has got to the hard core of his teaching. Apart from going to Church, what else is different about us from the people who live around us? And when we single out an aspect of the gospel that might reveal the attractive, distinctiveness of this way of life have we chosen a theme that has a depth, wisdom and balance about it lacking in other quarters?

Take, for instance, that teaching about marriage from Ephesians this morning. Despite the best efforts of New Testament commentators to put it in context, the fact is that it is off key with much contemporary opinion about the role of women in marriage. What the writer has done is to take the household code of the day, with its automatic assumption of the subordinate

status of women, and then try to transform it by insisting that husbands have an equal duty to honour, respect and love their wives. Putting it on a par with the mystical relationship between Christ and his Church also raises the status of marriage. But when the preacher has done all he can to make allowances for the cultural assumptions of the Ephesians, the reality is that this portion of Scripture is rarely read out now at Marriage Services because it is such an affront to popular feminist understandings of the equality of roles of men and women in marriage.

At a regional deanery meeting back when I was a curate we had an impassioned debate about marriage, marriage preparation, and divorce and re marriage. "We have something distinctive to offer," proclaimed one of the junior clergy, "Christian marriage!" Wait for it, I thought, now we are going to hear what this unique contribution to the world's well being is all about. But the answer never came. There was just more rhetoric and no content.

Over the past few decades, through the experience of trying to provide effective marriage preparation for the many couples whose wedding Services I have officiated at, I have done some hard thinking about what Christian marriage is about. Here are my conclusions so far. I would be interested to hear about your hard won nuggets of wisdom on the subject after the Service.

Two people, who feel they can trust one another, and who have a sense of hope about a shared future, make promises to one another in God's house. The promises are a big ask, but they are doable. It is in the wisdom of the Church that the promises are general and open

ended. I shudder at some of the write your own promises I hear about where couples promise the sun, the moon and the stars to one another, and often spell it out in fine print terms. Who could really live up to these tyrannical demands, or look back on them years later without cringing with embarrassment? But back to the Church wedding – after the Service is over the couple spend the rest of their lives growing into those promises, becoming what they said they would be for each other. That takes good will, humour, energy, patience, relational skills, at times Olympian calm, and yes, the grace of God.

It is remarkable, when you stop to think about it, that God has chosen marriage out of all the possible kinds of human bonding to be the premier relationship through which he makes his love known in the world. You might have thought that friendship, or the respectful connection between a religious teacher and his disciple might have got the nod instead. But no, it is marriage that has achieved this sacramental status. For reasons best known to himself God uses the intense energy exchange that goes on in our primary attachment relationship as a favoured disclosure point of the divine love that bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

Somehow in the 101 details of ordinary living – putting out the rubbish, making financial decisions, driving children to sport, entertaining friends and neighbours, as well as showing one another tenderness and affection - we open a door into the world through which God can enter it. Christian marriage is about more than just knocking the rough edges off each other in a spirit of tolerant good humour. It is about

trying to help each other grow together spiritually. One of the last of the Holy Roman Emperors summed it up in a memorable short sentence when he said to his bride on their wedding day, “Now we can help each other get to heaven.”

So it is that in all the practical, humdrum details of married life, Christians have the opportunity to find out in concrete terms about the love that shaped the stars, and that led our saviour to hang on the cross. Divine grace is like an electric current infusing our world at many levels. It can be accessed in a particular way when two people decide to let God in to their partnership building, to be a resource as they try to build a joint life of rich companionship.

I don't want to be too romantic about the struggles of an evolving marriage. Someone once asked Billy Graham's wife if she had ever thought about separation or divorce as a possibility. “No,” she said, “but I have thought about murder.” And I have noticed that committed Christian couples that can be very frank with one another about just about every aspect of their life together often find it hard to share the spiritual side of their lives. It is as though praying together, or being simple, clear and direct with one another about their walk with God is the most intimate act, the most difficult thing, truly the love that dare not speak its name.

In 150 AD the author of the letter to Diognetes captured in words what it is for us to be a called out people, who both belong in this world yet are distinctively Christian:

The Christians are distinguished from other people neither by country, nor language, nor the customs which they observe. For they neither inhabit cities of their own, nor employ a peculiar form of speech, nor lead a life which is marked out by its singularity. They dwell in their own countries, but simply as sojourners. As citizens, they share in all things with others, and yet endure all things as if foreigners. Every foreign land is to them as their native country, and every land of their birth as a land of strangers...They are in the flesh, but they do not live after the flesh. They pass their days on earth, but they are citizens of heaven. They obey the prescribed laws, and at the same time surpass the laws by their lives. They love all people, and are persecuted by all. They are poor, yet make many rich. To sum up all in one word - what the soul is in the body, that are Christians in the world.