

Sermon Kentish Town

Graham White

15 January 2006

Readings

1 Sam. 3:1–20
Ps. 139:1–6, 13–18
Jn 1:43–51

Text

“Do you believe because I told you I saw you under the fig tree?
You will see greater things than that” (Jn 1:50)

John’s gospel plays with us: we come to it, sit down and try to read it, with expectations that are formed by the other gospels. We expect to find a straightforward narrative: birth, then a period when Jesus went about doing good, followed by crucifixion and resurrection. And we find, instead of a birth, a long metaphysical poem, followed by Christ’s baptism, followed by this odd little story. It starts off with a straightforward conversation – Philip says to Nathanael, “come and see!” and Nathanael replies with a bit of local prejudice, “can anything good come out of Nazareth” – so, presumably, Nathanael is not taking Philip’s new enthusiasm very seriously. Seen it all before. This man Philip, you know. Just wait a while, and he’ll calm down. Then things suddenly get very serious. Jesus seems to know, to just know, what sort of man Nathanael is: me? you saw me? how do you know?

So too with the other readings. The Psalm, too, tells of wonders: the first wonder is that God knows about us, knows everything we do, knows us from the inside as well as from the outside. We sort of expect this: this is what God does, it is, as it were, God’s job to know this sort of thing. And this is genuinely wonderful, but the wonder is located out there, in God. But then: then the focus switches, attention swings round to us, and the fact

that we too are wonderful. God created *us*, and that means that the wonder is located right here, too, inside each one of us. We have all been made by God, and this, too, is a mysterious work, something that impresses by its subtlety and wisdom.

Well, fine, you might think. But what's wonderful about *me*? What could be more everyday? I'm not perfect: if we want to find the wonder of God's creation, then why look here? Look at what God does, look at the wonder of beautiful scenery, at the wonder of a starry sky – go up to heaven, if you like – and, if you want to look at wonderful people, look at great or good or heroic people: but me? really? Or, if you like, we feel that human existence is just too small, too grubby, to be wonderful, to be intricate, to be subtle: this is a feeling that we have because we are too familiar, and too bored, with our own lives, but a feeling which puts aside God's role in our creation.

Which brings us to Samuel. A little lad in the temple, sleeping next to the most holy things: the Ark of the Covenant. And he, on hearing a voice, doesn't connect it to the holy things surrounded him (and you suspect that these holy things had simply become part of the everyday for Samuel): rather, he connects it to his normal, human life, and his normal human duties. Too blasé (in the way of children) to even say "who me?"; maybe to think "oh no, not Eli *again*" or something like that.

A thread runs through all of this: the idea, the very natural but wrong idea, that God is elsewhere. That God sits in heaven, not here, or that we meet him after our death, but not now, or that God was active at the creation of the world, or in the early church, but not subsequently, and that we are left to get on by ourselves. That the divine things, wonderful as they are, have nothing to do with our lives, with our existence: that our existence is mundane, not visited by God, not holy enough. And in so doing we mistake God's purposes: we think of a God who is infinitely remote, who wants to call us away from human life, away from the limitations, the singular perspective, the joys and sorrows of life such as we human beings live. And in so doing we forget a great deal: we forget the way the psalm talks in parallel, and on equal terms, of God's abilities and knowledge, and of his creation of us. And we forget, also, what God did in becoming a human being: the fact that God lovingly and joyfully took on human life, with all of its limitations, with its singular perspective, and with all of its joys and sorrows. And when we we add the incarnation, the becoming human of God, then the contrast – between, on the one hand, the wonder of God's being and, on the other hand, the wonder of human life – becomes easier to deal with: God did not only create human beings, but God *was* a human being.

So: John's gospel. It was, very likely, written later than the others: it

was written from a more reflective viewpoint than the others. It was written by someone who wrote, not just about the spectacular events, but about the meaning that they had: by someone who had thought long and hard about the significance of the events of Jesus' life. It was about what it was that convinced people that here was the son of God, living among them: about what it was that led people to leave all they had and follow him. Of course there are the miracles, of course there are the spectacular acts: but, by themselves, these would have been just the acts of a wonder-worker. And, in John's gospel, over and over again, we are shown that the miracles are not important in themselves, but because of what they represent: that they show that here is the Word of God, dwelling among us. That what Jesus showed us is how a human life can be divine: that his life can be a way for God to be. That God, if you like, does not exist solely in heaven, but also can be infinitely close to all of us: that God could be God in a life such as ours.

There are probably a great number of things that go into convincing people of such a thing. And when the author of John's gospel thought about it, what came to be more prominent, as well as the mighty acts, the signs and wonders, is the background: how Jesus was when he was simply being human, rather than being a wonder-worker or an infinitely wise teacher. The details of a life: a conversation suddenly turned round, a startling flash of insight into a person, an enjoyment of human life which led the more puritanical members of the community to take offence. Details which, on reflection, fitted into a whole. And, of course, if we are to think of the non-miraculous parts of Jesus' life, the one thoroughly and decisively non-miraculous part is the crucifixion: the part of Jesus' life in which any average wonder-worker would have deployed a miracle and got free. And in which Jesus, the Word of God dwelling among us, went through with the life and the death that he had chosen.

So we get it said, over and over again, in this Gospel, that God was, is, dwelling among us. And when God dwells among us, it does not cause God to be any less human: rather it is that God (by an intricate and subtle act, as intricate and subtle as the original creation) fitted the divine existence faithfully into the limitations of a human life. And that he showed the way to be human, and that, by showing us that, he also showed us the way that we, in our turn, could become human again, and thus could find our way back to God. And that, finding our way back to God, we might realise just how fearfully and wonderfully made we are.

© Graham White 15 January 2006