

Sermon for Sunday 25th April 2010

There are some people who refuse to see what is under their noses: who refuse to be convinced by overwhelming evidence. The world's myriad of fossils does not disprove the creation stories of Genesis, because Genesis is more concerned with God's part in bringing the world into being than with describing how he did it. But fossils certainly show that the evolution of nature took a long time, and that creatures existed once that do not exist today. The continued insistence of some upon a creation date of 23rd October 4004 BC, and the idea that fossils were planted as part of some inscrutable divine purpose to mislead, is very hard to take. More recently, the likes of British writer David Irving or Belgian politician Roeland Raes continuing to assert that the Third German *Reich* killed no Jews, or very few, in the 1940s seems to us like quite incredible stubbornness in the face of provable facts. We find it difficult to believe that these are the honest beliefs of intelligent people – it must be either blatant dishonesty or incredible stupidity.

The same cannot be said, however, of those who did not, or do not, accept the divinity of Jesus. Significant proportions of the Christian world, from the Arians of the fourth century to the more relaxed Liberals of today, have not regarded that as an essential part of the faith – much more important for them is what Jesus stands for, the teaching ascribed to him and the example he set. It is hard, therefore, to label as ignorant or doubt the sincerity of the Jewish people who actually knew him, yet could see in him nothing more than the son of Joseph. Given the centrality to Jewish belief of the oneness and indivisibility of God, it was natural for any doubt to come down on the side of ranking Jesus as a wandering preacher in the style of the prophets of old. Even the idea of Jesus as God's Messiah, the anointed liberator, would naturally have been taken with a large pinch of salt, given how many false claims to that role there had been, and the considerable differences between how Jesus behaved and what the Messiah was expected to do.

Hence the challenge put to Jesus in the Portico of Solomon, by John's account – 'If you are the Christ, tell us plainly' – was a perfectly natural question to ask. Many who knew Jesus must have asked it; if not of him directly, then at least as a puzzle in their own heads.

John's Gospel, however, is a late account of Jesus' life and significance, stemming from a Christian circle where beliefs about him were already well-developed. In John's prologue we find the well-known account of the incarnation: 'the Word [of God] became flesh, and dwelt among us', 1:14. As well as sharing with other accounts the story of Jesus' baptism ('this is my Son, with whom I am well pleased', 1:32), John's Gospel contains strong hints of divinity in words ascribed to Jesus himself.

The first of these uses the name by which God revealed himself to Moses. 'Before Abraham was born, I AM', 8:58. In today's passage, we find Jesus referring back to this when he answers the challenge 'Tell us plainly' by saying 'I've already told you'. He goes on to repeat the claim in even clearer terms: 'I and the Father are one', 10:30 – and John spells it out for us once more in the confession of the formerly doubting Thomas, 'My Lord and my God!', 20:28.

'I have told you', says Jesus, 'but you do not believe', 10:23. That, for John's circle, was the problem. It was not that Jesus had been coy, or even uncertain, about his own status: it was that the leap of faith made by them, and most graphically made by Thomas in the Upper Room, was a leap these Jewish questioners were unable to make. Others, apparently, did make it; because when John, several times, says 'many believed in him', the full belief of John's own circle must be meant.

But the questioners in Jerusalem not only did not believe: they called the claim of divinity blasphemous, and they threatened Jesus with stoning. The answer Jesus gives to that is very interesting, because he seems to defend himself against the charge of making a claim to divine status in words, while simultaneously making that claim in a different way - pointing to how the action of God can be seen in his own actions. On the one hand, says Jesus, there is scriptural precedent for applying the word 'god' to lesser beings - Psalm 82 does that in describing God's reproof to a sort of spirit council that has made a dog's breakfast of ruling the world. So what Jesus may or may not have *said* is not a sufficient basis for calling him a blasphemer. But on the other hand, he goes on to say, you do indeed see God's works in me: what I am doing is what God would do. In other words: I am teaching how God's Law is to be understood for this generation. By healing the sick and raising the dead, I am showing God's power and linking it to his love. I am strengthening faith and promising forgiveness of sins. In everything I do that improves people's lives, God can be seen caring for the human race. And if these Godlike works are my true claim to divinity, are they really a good reason to stone me?

Now I believe this emphasis on seeing God in Godlike actions has something to tell us about the people of other faiths and none with whom we share our everyday lives and, indeed, the world. The reason why Jesus' questioners in our Gospel passage could not see what the Gospel writers saw was, apparently, that they 'did not belong to his sheep'. Here the popular image of God as shepherd, which we heard in Jeremiah's vision of Israel being gathered like a flock to share in God's good things, and which we probably all know from Psalm 23, is used again, this time in a negative way to explain how it is that some people do not recognise the shepherd's voice. But are we to say that all those who do not call themselves Christian are necessarily 'outside the flock'?

Labels, our Gospel suggests, are not actually the most important thing. There are many, many followers of other faiths, many humanists, many of our neighbours who adopt no religious or philosophical designation at all, who nevertheless recognise goodness when they see it. They have their own ways of responding to it: they may not see themselves as doing God's work when they imitate that goodness themselves. But they are doing so nevertheless. When the Quakers proclaim 'There is that of God in everyone', they are surely recognising the same potential. Christ has other sheep, not of the same fold as us, whom he seeks and saves in his own way.

Two of our hymns today have sung of ways in which we meet Christ and experience God. The natural world and its order - creation, however it came into being - is one. In the world's suffering and in the irrepressible human spirit we find another. But let us not forget that in the individual - in our neighbour, whatever his or her creed - we also see God's image and the furtherance of God's work.