

Sermon for Trinity Sunday, 30th May 2010

If you're regular worshippers here, you are probably used – maybe resigned – to my bringing examples from University life into my sermons. It's one of those things Elders do when they preach – inject into their message something from their experience outside the church community – and mine just happens to be there, in the cyclic routine of the academic year. But even so, if you've read today's Order of Service, you've probably been thinking I'm a bit far out, in entitling an early June sermon 'Freshers' Week'. 'University Freshers don't turn up until late September. What's he on about?'

Well no, I haven't completely lost it. The Freshmen and -women of whom I was thinking when I chose this title are not new students. They are the new Members of Parliament, who completed their first week in that role just a few days ago: a week that for them must have been as full of new experiences and mysteries, as exciting and yet as unnerving as the experience of any new arrival at University, at a new school or indeed a new kindergarten.

I have a particular interest in Public Law – the field of law that covers how government works, the constitution and the limiting role of the courts – so I've been looking at the guide published for new members of the House of Commons, most of which appears online for anyone to browse. The first instruction sounds reassuringly prosaic. Turn up at a particular office off the Victoria Embankment; bring some ID and your Returning Officer's letter confirming that you were the winning candidate in your constituency. There you get a pass which lets you wander round the parliamentary estate.

Having done that, the new member has a lot of exploring to do. There are several buildings to find your way round: you need to find a place to work, places to eat, maybe temporary lockers or a children's nursery. There are arrangements to be made for personal staff, stationery to order, financial interests to be registered; an induction briefing and a good many people to meet. Some of the instructions remind me unmistakably of being a new boy at boarding school: 'You may find that your party Whip has made arrangements for you to share an office with an experienced Member until your own office becomes available'.

And then comes the 18th May, the day on which the Queen actually summoned a Parliament to meet at Westminster. Members old and new drift into the Commons' Chamber as though for the opening Assembly of the school year or the inaugural lecture in a University department. Commissioners representing the Queen summon you to the Lords to be told that Her Majesty can't make it today, and will be telling you in a few days' time why this Parliament has been called. In the mean time you are to choose a Speaker, so back to the Commons' Chamber, where the Father of the House, its longest-serving member, presides at the Speaker's re-election. The Speaker then says a few words welcoming members old and new, after which members get down to the lengthy business of swearing their Allegiance. Queues form alongside the government dispatch-box, where Clerks preside over copies of the Torah, the New Testament, the Guru Granth Sahib and other sacred texts as well as the form of Affirmation for the non-religious. Microphones pick up murmured phrases like 'Welcome back, you know the drill'; 'hold it in the other hand'; 'now sign the roll

over there'; 'Do you need the text in Cornish?'; 'now shake hands with the Speaker'; 'shall we come back tomorrow?'

I think it was the asides caught by the microphone that really made me think about how parliamentary 'Freshers' week' must be for those caught up in it. The mikes were on in the House of Lords as well, so one could hear one Lord Commissioner whispering to another 'the brief says we take off our hats when we leave the Chamber, but I never bother', or a colleague saying to the Leader of the House 'have we really got to stay at our posts till 7.30?'. Although there was nothing that would interest the media like certain remarks picked up during the election campaign, these private exchanges did bring it home to me that the actors in the great political drama are people: human individuals, who get bored or excited, hungry or tired, puzzled or overawed. And as I thought especially about the new MPs, the 'freshers', I reflected what a relief it must be to find not only familiar faces but also to find that others are friendly. You meet people you know through party activity like fellow-entrants to University from your old school; getting to know your party Whip must be a bit like learning to recognise your housemaster or personal tutor; when he shakes hands with you like the Headmaster, you discover that the Speaker is approachable too and also interested in your well-being and the reasons why you're there.

And all of this happens before the general public really tunes into Parliament at all. The so-called State Opening, when the Queen tells the Houses what parliamentary business her Government thinks needs tackling, comes at the end of Freshers' week, not at the beginning. Viewers who turn on their televisions for the first time at the Queen's Speech see the Commons forming a silent faceless huddle, then back in their own Chamber facing each other in groups as opponents, ready to begin the familiar battles of words. They miss those personal asides that give the human touch, they forget the emotions that must go with a new role in new and rather awe-inspiring surroundings; and so they easily overlook the comradeship within the parliamentary community that smooths the new member's path. We assume political opponents must always be hostile to one another, and so we would find it quite surprising to reflect how much shared experience binds parliamentarians together when out of the line of cameras and away from set-piece debates.

So I come to my point. The ways in which the parliamentary world makes newcomers welcome, answering their questions, showing them the ropes, and the fact that experienced members (of all parties) share in this quite as much as Clerks and officials, illustrate an awareness of each other as people, of a common humanity, perhaps a common vulnerability which the old hands recognise in the newcomers but also remember from their own beginnings, which goes beyond the groupings and labels that say they should be rivals or enemies. Of course it doesn't always work as it should: at school and University too, there are people indifferent to the newcomer's plight or ready to take advantage. But on the whole, it does seem that the people who make decisions for us are not only human themselves but able and willing to recognise the humanity of others who share their unique environment; and I for one find that quite a reassuring thought.

The message of Jesus is all about the importance of our common humanity, and how lesser barriers must fall as we recognise in each other the image of God. Jesus came to stand alongside people of all ages, of all races, of all creeds. He taught us to recognise and care for the neighbour who needs our help. He associated with

outcasts of society, with agents of a hated occupying power; but also with establishment figures like Jairus and Nicodemus – he was not so dedicated to the ‘man in the street’ that he could not spot goodness, or need, where they existed in the ruling class. The community that proclaims his message today came of age with the realisation that circumcision, and the Hebrew heritage for which it stood, could not be defining characteristics for the Christian fellowship: that love was not to be limited by any of the issues that divide us into groups and factions in worldly life.

Jesus built upon a solid Scriptural tradition in proclaiming that message. We heard, a few moments ago, the prophet Isaiah speaking of how the Lord would number among his people such unfortunates as eunuchs, who felt separated from ordinary society by their inability to raise families, or foreigners who lived amongst the Jews but lacked Jewish roots. Their potential, their humanity, was no less than that of the chosen people of God. And the story of the baptism of Jesus, an appropriate passage for Trinity Sunday because it depicts all three persons of the Godhead – the Father’s voice, Jesus in the water and the Spirit as a dove – reminds us that in the very being of God himself there is also love, relationship, and emotion. Jesus might have been ‘down here’ while the Father was ‘up there’, present in time rather than the divine eternity; but he remained the ‘beloved Son’, God’s pride and delight.

In all our encounters, therefore, but perhaps particularly when we think of groups of people of whom we disapprove – whether strongly, as with sex offenders and neo-nazis, or in a more moderate vein, as with beggars or noisy neighbours or those who keep the church hotter or colder than we would like – let us remember the human side. WS Gilbert was perfectly right to write ‘When a felon’s not engaged in his employment or maturing his felonious little plan, his capacity for innocent enjoyment is just as great as any honest man.’ Among our enemies in particular, it is crucial to recognise the individual who is our neighbour and a fellow-child of God.