

EPIPHANY SERMON: Hereford Cathedral 23-01-11

He comes to us as One unknown, without a name, as of old, by the lake-side, He came to those men who knew Him not. He speaks to us the same word: 'Follow thou me!' and sets us to the tasks which He has to fulfil for our time. He commands. And to those who obey Him, whether they be wise or simple, He will reveal Himself in the toils, the conflicts, the sufferings which they shall pass through in His fellowship; and, as an ineffable mystery, they shall learn in their own experience Who He is.

So ended an extremely influential book by Albert Schweitzer, *The Quest of the Historical Jesus*. Shall we know Jesus through study, or thinking about him, or discussion, or speculation? No, says Schweitzer. 'He comes to us as One unknown'; the way to know him is to follow him. 'To those who obey him, whether they be wise or simple, he will reveal himself in the toils, the conflicts, the sufferings which they shall pass through in his fellowship...'

Our faith is something to be lived, not merely talked about. Of course, we should be able to give a sensible account of it, we should be able to discuss and communicate it in words and art and music, we should be able to express it in terms of our culture and relate it to philosophy. But that is all secondary to living it. This is something E M Forster puts squarely before us in his book *A Passage to India*. The elderly Mrs Moore has just emerged from an overwhelming and disconcerting experience of a booming and mysterious echo deep in a remote cave; as she recovers herself in the sunshine all sorts of thoughts come into her mind: 'But suddenly, at the edge of her mind, Religion appeared, poor little talkative Christianity, and she knew that all its divine words from "Let there be light" to "It is finished" only amounted to ...' the terrifying and timeless echo she had just heard in the Marabar caves. 'Poor little talkative Christianity' -- is that quite fair? There's a grain of truth in it though, isn't there.

If I'm honest, the people who have taught me most about following Jesus Christ have been people who just got on with it, and not people who talked about it, however eloquently. I think of Cecil and Helen, whose sacrificial generosity, faithful prayer and selfless service brought faith in Jesus to life in a new way. I think of Francis and his companions, and Mother Teresa and hers; of Albert Schweitzer who gave up academic theology to train as a doctor and lose himself serving people in Africa; of Oscar Romero who moved away from safe ecclesiastical work and study to serve the poor and champion their cause, even though it cost him his life. That's where I've really seen what it is to follow Jesus. They're people who – in Schweitzer's own words – have passed through toils, conflicts and sufferings in his fellowship; wise or simple they've obeyed him, and he has revealed himself to them.

How is Jesus revealed to us? The revelation of Jesus is the great theme of Epiphany: revealed to the wise men by the star, revealed in his baptism by John, revealed in the miracle of turning water into wine. Yet these are just stories to us, just hearsay. How is he revealed *to us*? He is revealed when we do as the first disciples did, and follow him. But what do we mean by following him?

There was a bit of a fad among some Christians a few years back that seems to have faded now, for asking, when confronted with a problem, 'WWJD' – 'What Would Jesus Do'? What would he do? – I'll do the same! The trouble is, as the gospels show all too clearly, it's very difficult to guess what Jesus is ever about to do. So if we think that following him means guessing what he would do and then doing it ourselves we're bound to be wrong a good bit of the time. Worse than that, we'll be putting it on to the outside of ourselves, like a garment we've picked up and decided to wear, instead of living something from deep within that is genuinely part of our flesh and blood souls. We'll be acting a part, not living a life.

The Swiss psychiatrist Carl Jung had something very important to say about this. He said, 'It is no easy matter to live a life that is modelled on Christ's, but it is unspeakably harder to live one's own life as truly as Christ lived his. Anyone who did this would run counter to the conditions of his own history, and though he might thus be fulfilling them, he would none the less be misjudged, derided, tortured and crucified. He would be a kind of crazy Bolshevik who deserved the cross. We therefore prefer the historically sanctioned and sanctified imitation of Christ'. In other words, if we would really follow the example of Jesus Christ then we have to live our own life, as our own life, in the same spirit that he lived his – a spirit of absolute Integrity and daring, pouring out of our own truest being – and not

cave in to mediocre conventions and polite going through of the motions. Jesus gave up the Spirit at his crucifixion; he sends this same Spirit – the very Spirit by which he lived – upon us. What matters isn't asking 'what would Jesus do' and putting the answer on like a borrowed coat, but daring from within ourselves to live our lives in the strength of his Spirit as fully and authentically as we can. And for that we are often crucified. Like Jesus, we may not look conventionally religious, or carefully respectable. As Jung said somewhere else, 'Great saints were, as we know, sometimes great heretics, so it is probable that anyone who has immediate experience of God is a little bit outside the organisation one calls the Church. The Church itself would have been in a pretty pass if the Son of God had [become] a law-abiding Pharisee, a point one tends to forget'.

'Anyone who has immediate experience of God.' We're back to Albert Schweitzer aren't we: 'to those who obey Him, whether they be wise or simple, He will reveal Himself in the toils, the conflicts, the sufferings which they shall pass through in His fellowship, and, as an ineffable mystery, they shall learn in their own experience Who He is'.

If we would see Jesus revealed then reading about him, or second-guessing how to imitate him, are not really going to get us there. Daring to live in his Spirit – as we have seen a few people do, whose names are revered among us – is the way to experience who he is; and probably also, as Jung said, to be 'misjudged, derided, tortured and crucified'.

I'm saying these things because it makes me ask how I live my own life as a follower of Christ. Am I really following him, or just going through the motions? Would my life help anyone else catch a glimpse of Jesus and inspire them to follow him? These are sobering questions. I remember when I was at school someone asking a question I've heard several times since: 'If you were accused of being a follower of Jesus, would there be enough evidence to convict you?'

If we would see him revealed, if we would learn who really he is, then we should follow him by living in his Spirit and pass, inevitably, through toils, conflicts and sufferings, and be misjudged, derided, tortured and crucified. But we shall know him, and we shall see him.

Needless to say, all I've just done is talk about him! But it's living him that has to be our business.