

Tuesday 11th April 2017

## **A Way of Waiting and Darkness**

*Sir, we wish to see Jesus...* (John 12:21b)

I can never read this passage from John 12 without remembering two things: first at a church where I was Vicar there was a wooden plate that faced the preacher in the pulpit which simply read: “Sir, we would see Jesus”! And the second thing that always strikes me is that these two Greeks *might still be waiting* to see Jesus! They ask Philip, Philip went and told Andrew, then Andrew and Philip went and told Jesus... and Jesus responds with some mysterious words about the time has come and dying wheat and whatnot...! There is no reassurance that the Greeks got to see Jesus. It reminds me of some call centres when I’ve tried to report a fault and my enquiry is gradually escalated: “Please hold the line, your call is important to us...”

There is no positive place for waiting in our world. (Runcorn, p17) Waiting is an unprofitable inconvenience. Increasing waiting times are seen as a major problem in the NHS, maybe rightly so, but maybe also the analysis needs to go a little deeper...?

Waiting humbles us. It reminds us that we are *dependent* people; waiting exposes the illusion of control in our lives; waiting for others reminds us that we are not the centre of the

story! Waiting is supremely the experience of the poor — because, if you can afford it, you can choose to be fast-tracked! Waiting requires us to learn and value a different set of priorities.

One of the images of waiting in the Bible is that of a servant's attentive concentration on the will of the master: *As the eyes of the slaves look to the hand of their master so our eyes look to the Lord our God.* (Ps 123.2, 3) Or the vigil of guards on the city walls, waiting for the dawn (Ps 130.6).

Or think about the eyes of the orchestra or music group focussed on the conductor and looking for every movement of their hands and facial expression - hardly an empty waiting. Or the footballer 'waiting' for the ball - alert and poised for action (unless they play for Manchester United!)

It's been said that 'waiting tests our loves and longings.' (Runcorn, p18) Waiting deepens desire and separates our passing enthusiasms from our true longings. No wonder that we speak of some types of prayer as 'waiting on God'.

Last evening I explained that in the course of these three evenings I want to identify four marks of an authentic spirituality; four ways of being as a church that are profoundly counter-cultural. Last evening I offered **The Way of Loss** as the first mark; to which I add first this evening the **Way of Waiting**.

But our gospel reading has not finished with us yet! Whether or not the Greeks are waiting still, Jesus is prompted by their desire to see him to speak of light and darkness...

*Walk while you have the light, so that the darkness does not overtake you... (John 12:35b)*

Darkness, like loss and like waiting, is too easily assumed to be negative. But I want to suggest that there are aspects of darkness in our journey of faith which we have no choice but to embrace...

Earlier in his gospel John records Jesus saying: *those who follow me will never walk in darkness.* (8:12) This is the darkness of **separation from God** that is bridged forever by the cross of Christ. Then again, the regular discipline of turning from the **darkness of sin** and evil to the light of Christ lies at the heart of discipleship.

But then there is the **darkness of human brokenness and pain**. There is a place in Christian experience for that costly vocation to enter and abide in those places of brokenness and pain. It will be a place of loving vigil, waiting in the dark. (Runcorn, p15)

Then again, **darkness** may accompany an experience of **something new and uncertain**. We use that expression of 'being in the dark' about something to mean that we are beyond our familiar understanding. When Abraham set out on his journey we read that a *deep and terrifying darkness came upon him...* (Gen

15:12) So we should not be surprised if this is the experience of a church journeying into a new and unfamiliar phase of its life! The most sensible response when you can't see anything is not to rush around or fight it, but to be still. There are times, individually and collectively, when we must learn to listen and feel our way. It may well be slower and more hesitant, but no less faithful or purposeful. (Runcorn, op cit.)

Someone once said: "In the journey of the soul the Christian probably travels fastest by night". (Runcorn, p15) [pause] Am I alone in thinking that there are profound depths in that simple statement? [repeat statement] This is the darkness of deepening maturity: there can be no entering the depths without going into the dark.

After commanding his followers: *While you have the light, believe in the light, so that you may become children of light.* Well and good! But look what he does next: *After Jesus had said this, he departed and hid from them !!!* He presumably, at some level, left them in the dark once more!

So to add to our collection: the Way of Loss, the Way of Waiting and now, the Way of Darkness. These are not ways of spiritual growth that our culture celebrates: loss, waiting and darkness are to be avoided or minimised. But maybe we find in them some room for growth.