

Lent 5 – A new thing
St James, Colwall, 21st March 2010

I wonder how many of you have read *Gulliver's Travels*?

I know I did as a child and later on, as an adult when reading Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*, I was quite taken with Jane saying that she read it when young and fully believed that if she could travel widely she would encounter the little people of Lilliput or the giants of Brobdingnag. It is widely sold as a children's story today but in fact it was written as a scathing political commentary on the human race. Swift's epitaph in St Patrick's cathedral, reads "The body of Jonathan Swift, Doctor of Divinity, dean of this cathedral church, is buried here, where fierce indignation can lacerate his heart no more. Go, traveller, and imitate if you can, one who strove his utmost to champion liberty." And it was that fierce indignation that motivated the story.

The trouble is the story is so fascinating it has actually taken over the message and the version that is commonly sold today has been Bowdlerised and in the process the original message has been lost. People love stories don't they? You have only got to say, "Once upon a time", to have instantly got the attention of any passing child, or adult come to that. But good stories usually have a message. We understand things very easily in stories — they remain in our memories and we can think about them afterwards. But in the process we can make two sorts of error: one is to interpret the story literally like Jane Eyre did and the other is to miss the point entirely like most children do with *Gulliver's Travels*.

The Bible of course, is full of stories. One of my favourites is the story of the Garden of Eden and the Fall. People have understood this literally but I think most people understand that the story is symbolic but don't always grasp the essential truth that lies behind it. People understand the story as conveying an idea of God who is very picky and willing to condemn all of mankind to pain and hard labour simply because of a breach of one of His commands. But the central point of the story is the tree of knowledge of good and evil. Without that knowledge of good and evil that we as humans have, we could do no sin. After all the animals do not sin: they simply obey their nature. The Garden of Eden is a story about our human nature.

The defining story for the Israelites is the story of the Exodus. The Exodus defines the children of Israel as a people led by God to the promised land. Today many of the Israelis will interpret that story literally, to the detriment of peace in the Middle East. We ourselves would interpret the truth more universally as applying to anyone who was attempting to follow God and the promised land as the Kingdom of God. Fair enough, but what exactly does it mean to follow God? The children of Israel wanted a set of rules which they could follow to be sure that they were right, and I think that applies to many people today. Just tell us what to do they say. Give us a set of rules and we will do our best to follow them. The fundamentalist Jews attempt to do just that by applying laws of Deuteronomy just as if they were living in ancient times. Of course this doesn't quite work as you can't go around stoning people for adultery or because you have a disobedient son. But I think they try make up for this by being even more careful about the rules that they can obey. It gets quite ridiculous when people have to have two refrigerators and two stoves simply in order to keep the dietary laws of not mixing foods of different types.

One can smile, but I think the desire to have a set of rules to follow is deep within us all. But our first reading, from Isaiah, says that this must change:

Do not remember the former things,
or consider the things of old.
I am about to do a new thing

now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?
I will make a way in the wilderness
and rivers in the desert.

It is not that God has changed but rather that our perception of God needs to change. And the new thing that Isaiah prophesies is Jesus Christ.

Now there is a story behind this too, but this story is hard to understand because it is about the nature of God and our relationship to Him. Of course we have the story of the life of Christ, the teaching, the parables, the miracles, and above all, the crucifixion and resurrection. But what does it all mean? Some of it is fairly clear. If you take the sermon on the Mount for example you can see that Jesus is not setting out rules so much as principles. But these are not so much glorified rules as examples trying to illustrate the nature of God and if we understood the nature of God we would find it much easier to know what we should do.

Let me give you an example from computing. If, as frequently happens, you encounter a problem and ask someone about it, they will nearly always give you instructions in the form of click this, select that, double-click this, and press okay, and at the end you are no wiser than at the beginning and you will very likely encounter the same problem again. What you really need is to understand what the computer is trying to do and how it is going to interact with you. If you understand this then you can nearly always solve problems on your own. And if we understood the nature of God properly we would have no trouble in deciding what we should do, although this is not to say it might not be difficult to do it.

The trouble is we are limited in our ability to understand the story of Jesus. Some people in the past have imported ideas from the Old Testament and thought it quite legitimate to persecute Jews, an absolutely dreadful mistake. Others have interpreted the crucifixion as a sort of legal transaction in which God sacrificed His Son instead of penalising us for our sins. It does not seem to me that either of these reflect in any way the true nature of God. But that true nature is still very mysterious – as Isaiah says a new thing. What we *can* see is that it shows God sharing our nature, understanding our suffering and in the resurrection triumphing over sin. This is a human story we can understand and in this way we can relate to God in Christ. It is hard to pray to God, the creator of the universe, a concept we cannot hope to understand. It is not practical to follow a set of rules. But it does seem to me to be reasonable to ask the question, what would Jesus do, when we are confronted with choices. We can relate to a person but not to an abstract idea.

There is a progression we go through in our Christian lives, starting I guess as most people do, with the idea of not doing any harm or following the laws of the land and of trying to get on with our neighbours. But there is a progression beyond that where we actively pursue good and look to fight against evil and injustice in the world and not just live to be content within our own lives. But beyond that there is another progression to where we make Jesus the centre of our lives. This is what Paul is talking about in our second reading. His life as a Pharisee counted as nothing compared with the goal which he now saw as the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus.

And this vision is beautiful. We have mixed images at Easter time from the sombre celebration of Good Friday to Easter eggs and Easter bunnies on Easter day and we tend to miss out on the beauty of Christ. Let us not think of ourselves this Easter but rather think of Jesus as a source of light to the world and of things that are truly beautiful. In a way I think that is what Mary was doing in our gospel reading. Her action has all sorts of symbolic meanings but I think she stepped back and saw someone truly beautiful. May we all have this vision of God in our lives – and live up to it..