

2019-05-26 ... 6.30pm Evensong ... Revd Canon William Price

At the moment I'm reading a new book by the Reverend Professor John Barton, whom I know, about the Bible. It's called *A History of the Bible*, and it's in the top ten of books being sold in this country. I commend it very strongly to any of you who want to know about this unique religious book, the Bible. Professor Barton's book is very easy to read (unlike a new book by the former Archbishop Rowan Williams, which I gave up trying to read after page 2!). I know almost everything which Professor Barton has written, but he has put it all in a refreshing new context and I am enjoying every page. The Bible is not as straightforward as we sometimes think, but looking at it in detail and appreciating its meaning deepens one's faith, or so I am finding.

One of the points which Professor Barton makes is that it is very difficult to know for absolutely sure what Jesus actually said, as reported in the Gospels. For one thing Jesus spoke in a language called Aramaic, but the Gospels were written in the Greek language, so there might be nuances lost in translation. And then, of course, we read it in an English translation, so there might be further changes in meaning. Also, for a couple of generations after Jesus' life on earth memories of what he said were handed down by word of mouth, oral tradition, before the evangelists, Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, wrote down his words for future readers. Some of Jesus' sayings could have been modified during the decades of oral transmission, adding to some of his sayings and abbreviating some others. And of course there was no system of shorthand in those days to record speech.

And this leads me to the end of tonight's second reading, the final verses of St Matthew's Gospel, known as the Great Commission. It's many years since I officiated at a baptism, apart from christening my two granddaughters in Exeter Cathedral five and three years ago, but when I took baptisms regularly, often several times a month in different churches, I always read these verses at baptisms: **Jesus, after his resurrection, appeared to his disciples in Galilee, told them to baptize and make disciples in all nations, and promised them that he would be with them for ever, to the end of time.**

There are two tricky issues with these verses. Jesus commands his disciples to make disciples of all nations, but in the Book of Acts there is a great debate, in chapters 10 and 11, about whether Gentiles, non-Jews, could become members of the Christian Church. Those who opposed the membership of Gentiles cannot have known the final verses of St Matthew's Gospel with its reference to baptizing all nations, mainly because the Gospel had not then been written. The other tricky issue is that Jesus commands his disciples to baptize in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. But there are no other explicit references to the Trinity, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, in the New Testament, and it seems unlikely that Jesus would have used the expression immediately after his resurrection. Perhaps Jesus commanded his followers to baptize, and by the time the Gospel was written, possibly 50 years later, it was the rule to baptize in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, and so these words were added by the Gospel writer to what Jesus actually said.

It's like when we hear a story about someone or something and then repeat it to others. Speaking for myself at least, it's almost impossible not to add a detail or two to make it seem more authentic, although scarcely inspired!

So the words about baptizing all nations in the formula of the Trinity are perhaps not the actual words of Jesus, but rather words attributed to him by the inspired writer of the Gospel. Nonetheless these words can be accepted by us as what we might call inspired Gospel truth. They reflect the teaching of the Church at the time when this Gospel was written, and they are fundamental to the later history of the Church.

Back to tonight's reading. The eleven disciples were in Galilee – eleven because Judas Iscariot **PTO**

had committed suicide – and on the mountain they saw the risen Jesus and worshipped him. But how interesting to know that even at that time some of them doubted. Whatever the historical truth behind these words, the inclusion of these three words - **‘Though some doubted’** - is significant. There will always be those who question what they worship. In worship doubt is almost always waiting in the shadows, creeping in in our most vulnerable moments. **Doubt is not the opposite of faith. The opposite of faith is unbelief.** Doubt is an integral part of faith. We are not in our own human element in matters of faith, but the call is to persevere, to push on, to hang on. In the words of a lovely hymn by Charles Wesley (sadly not in any Church of England hymnbook): **‘To thee our humble hearts aspire, and ask the gift unspeakable; Increase in us the kindled fire, in us the works of faith fulfil...Faith lends its realizing light, the clouds disperse, the shadows fly; The invisible appears in sight, and God is seen by mortal eye’.**

But while some doubted, Jesus, according to these verses, gave them their final command: **‘Go therefore and make disciples’**. The command is also to us. **‘Go and make disciples’**. What are disciples? Disciples are followers of Jesus. And making disciples is one of the explicit priorities of this Diocese of Lichfield. And Jesus says: **‘Go’**. If we don’t bring people to be followers of Jesus, the Church will disappear. There will be no one left. We need to go, go out of church, and share the story of Jesus with people around us. Perhaps, like me, you feel embarrassed about this, something we call evangelism or mission. But it doesn’t call for anything dramatic. There’s no need to walk around the streets buttonholing people and shouting at them about Jesus. Sometimes, however, in quiet conversations we can talk about Jesus and tell people why following Jesus is important to us and why they might explore the possibility of joining us in following Jesus, and even coming to Church.

And whether the words in our second reading are the precise words of Jesus or the inspired words of the Gospel writer, the closing words surely echo exactly the wonderful and consoling message of Jesus to the eleven disciples and to us here tonight: **‘I am with you always, to the end of the age’**. That is his promise for ever to those who follow him. He is Emmanuel, God with us. Even if we try to bring others to follow to him and feel that we have failed to share with them what our faith means to us, we are not alone. Jesus is still with us, always. We have been baptized in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. In the words of the Catechism in the Book of Common Prayer we have been made members of Christ, children of God, and inheritors of the kingdom of heaven. And in the family of the Church, encouraging and strengthening one another, we are called to grow in love, love for God and love for one another.

One day we shall be called to be with God for ever, and the wonderful truth is that Jesus will still be with us, for ever. So rejoice today and every day in the inexhaustible and ineffable joy of your salvation.

To God alone, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, be the glory.

Amen.

