

### Sermon Lent III 2006...

We are not here merely to learn *about* Jesus. Better than that, he calls us to know and feel his presence constantly. So that you feel you can turn to him naturally at any time. The best way to draw close to Jesus is to use the eyes and ears of your imagination to realise his presence. The gospel stories are so natural, the conversations so vivid. Jesus didn't set himself up before the crowds as if he were giving the Moses Memorial Lecture.

He drew close to people in Galilee. And we can draw close to him by reading the gospel stories. A good way is to choose a chapter, read it slowly and read it aloud to yourself. In fact read it to your wife or husband. Read it to the children. The King James Bible is miraculous for it evokes the physical presence and movements of Jesus in the rhythm of its prose. Here's an example. Think of this sermon not as a sermon but as a practical.

*And it came to pass the day after that he went into a city called Nain and many of his disciples went with him and much people. And when he came nigh to the gate of the city, there was a dead man carried out, the only son of his mother, and she was a widow. And much people of the city was with her*

You can see if you try the little town. The small town of Nain is halfway up the northern slope of the Hill of Moreh, facing the northern arm of the Plain of Jezreel. From Nazareth, Nain was plainly visible sitting in the middle of the hill about nine miles to the southeast. See the gate of the city and the sudden emergence of the funeral procession. The widow distraught. Her friends trying to comfort her. Her husband dead and now her only son. She would be destitute as well as distraught.

*And when the Lord saw her, he had compassion on her and said unto her, Weep not. And he came and touched the bier. And they that bore him stood still.*

And you can feel that stillness. The funeral procession would have been shocked. What was this strange intrusion on private grief? The music and the wailing would have stopped. What does he mean by that *Weep not*? Has he no tact, no sympathy? And what is he doing putting his hand on the coffin? There would be a moment's silence. Except for the stiff breeze on the hillside. Nain means *fair*. And it was a fair town with a view of Mount Tabor and, if you turned the other way, down over the Jordan and the Sea of Galilee. There were sepulchres carved out of the hillside and that is where they would be taking the dead youth. And Jesus himself not much older than the dead boy. And his own sepulchre barely two or three years off

*And he said, Young man, I say unto thee arise. And he that was dead sat up and began to speak. And he delivered him to his mother.*

And that's it – the whole story in less than a hundred words. I urge you to read this story again. Get the scene in your mind and dwell on it. Take yourself into that landscape and move around freely in it. You can witness the scene imagining that you're one of the disciples. Then you can see it from the perspective of one of the mourners. The again through the widow's eyes. Even from the position of the dead man.

Now open your Bible at St Matthew's gospel and see another side to Jesus' character.

*And behold a woman of Canaan cried unto him saying, O Lord thou Son of David, my daughter is grievously vexed with a devil.*

And what next? *He answered her not a word.* Has the Lord forgotten his manners?

And when he does speak, it's a snub: *It is not meet to take the children's bread and to cast it to dogs*

Quick as a flash she comes back with *Truth, Lord – yet the dogs eat of the crumbs which fall from their master's table.*

It's repartee isn't it? Banter. High comedy. The joke is that this woman is not a Jew – yet she talks like the biggest, brashest Jewish momma in the Bible. The whole scene is like byplay among minor characters in Shakespeare. Ponder it. Just wonder for a minute if this was one of those brief interludes when Jesus' mind found relief from what must have been the oppressive consciousness of his terrible destiny. Oh and by the way *her daughter was made whole from that very hour.*

When you read that story through slowly and out loud a few times, you will find that the character of Jesus starts to emerge with something like unnerving clarity. It all becomes intimate and you draw close to Jesus, getting to know him.

So let's move on to one of the strangest and most haunting episodes in the New Testament.

*And the Scribes and Pharisees brought unto him a woman taken in adultery. And they say unto him, Master this woman was taken in adultery in the very act.*

Then St John tells us the strange thing: *But Jesus stooped down and with his finger wrote on the ground, as if he heard them not. So when they continued asking him, he lifted himself up and said, He that is without sin, let him first cast a stone at he. And again he stooped down and wrote on the ground*

The gospel is showing us Jesus embarrassed

*And they which heard it being convicted by their own conscience went out one by one...and Jesus was left alone and the woman standing in the midst*

And Jesus is still looking at the ground – because John has to tell us again that he lifted himself up. And then the voice of the divine compassion in all its embarrassed simplicity:

*Woman, where are those thine accusers? Hath no man condemned thee? She said, No man, Lord. And Jesus said unto her, Neither do I condemn thee. Go and sin no more*

You have to read that story very softly to yourself. It's breathtaking. Terrible silent drama. You couldn't make it up. Can't you see the fogeys slinking away one by one? It's like Haydn and the *Farewell Symphony*. And the gratitude on the poor woman's face. Jesus had saved her life.

Don't think of the gospels as books to be read only in church. Regard them as your working tools to help you build up a larger picture of Jesus. Regard the gospels as invitation cards which are sent to you to invite you into Christ's presence. Read the gospel stories regularly. And when you do, bring the whole range of your imagination and concentration into play. Then you can enter the stories – then you become a character in them yourself.

And as you read them, you will remember them. This means you can turn to them in your memory at any time – in the night if you can't sleep. Waiting for the bus. Anytime. Anywhere. And then make these stories the basis for prayer. Prayer doesn't have to be massively formal and from ancient books. Prayer is just talking to Jesus, getting close, getting to know him. Try asking him questions in your imagination – ask him about himself as he is revealed in the gospels. The whole aim is to set up a constant conversation with him.

And finally memorise a few short prayers. Use these when you've finished your daily reading. Perhaps the Prayer of St Richard: *O Holy Jesus most merciful Redeemer, Friend and Brother, may I see thee more clearly, love thee more dearly and follow thee more nearly day by day.*

Or this, one of my favourites: *A Saviour of the world who by thy Cross and Passion hast redeemed me, save me and help me I humbly beseech thee O Lord.*