



19 June 2011  
Trinity Sunday  
Sung Eucharist  
2 Corinthians 13 vv. 11–end  
Matthew 28 vv. 16–20

## **This is a Canvas** By The Rev'd Duncan Dormor, The Dean

I was in London last Monday for a couple of meetings and as I walked along near Pimlico, I looked down at the pavement to see that etched into one of the stones were the words: 'This is a canvas'.

Not an ordinary grey, dirty, slab of stone, whose only rationale is to be stepped on, but a canvas – a space for colour, for creativity; a place reeking of possibility, of potential, of what could be brought alive through imagination and vision.

A small gathering on a hillside, an eclectic bunch of people: fishermen, a tax collector, a former political activist. What might people have thought, looking on as they headed up the hill: 'Well, not much will come of that'. In terms of raw human ability, a collection of people easily dwarfed, I would suspect, by some of the gatherings going on as we speak around Cambridge at innumerable garden parties. Yet of course, *'Without arms or charm of culture'* (to quote Auden), the words and actions of that small gathering has led to a greater transformation of the culture and civilization of the world than pretty much any other group in human history.

Today's reading from Matthew is known as the Great Commission when the disciples are given authority and instructed: *'Go therefore and make disciples of all nations...'* You can almost hear the giggles of the uninformed onlooker. How utterly, utterly absurd, that *'Persons of no importance, From an unimportant Province'* should be given such a commission. And yet Jesus gives them 'the Gentiles, 'the nations' as a canvas to bring into life.

I have always thought that *'go and make'* disciples is a bit misleading, as if the apostles, as if any Christian make followers for Christ, and indeed the Greek simply has a word for 'disciplining': disciplining the nations; disciplining the peoples.

It seems then to me more true to the ministry of Jesus to think of bringing the message of God's Love to encounters with people – encounters with individuals, with cultures. Look closely at those encounters in the Gospels and you will find they are frequently with representatives of groups that people hated or despised – the Canaanite woman – a people with whom the Jews had a long deep enmity; likewise the Samaritans; the Roman Centurion – symbolic of an oppressive power in the land; the tax-collectors (Quislings and collaborators); even the lepers and the possessed – part of a threatening underclass on the margins reminding people of what might happen to them if circumstances changed.

The commission is to reach out to all nations, to all manner of people with all sorts of alien ideas and strange practices, to reach out in love through *'a joyless world of swords and rhetoric'* and in so doing the Apostles and all faithful Christians must be prepared to confront and to challenge but also to take risks about one's identity, to be prepared to see things differently.

And in this - God's spirit is everywhere and always ahead - disciples are not then made by others but they emerge, they are unveiled, they bubble-up through authentic Christian encounter.

The contents of this paper are the views and expressions of the author.

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Artists have always used all sorts of things as canvases for their work, they have improvised, made do, grabbed the nearest thing to hand; they have also recycled, cleaned, prepared, scraped back, washed over, started again.

Likewise followers of Christ need to be attentive to the canvas of culture, to the canvas of the individual person. We are called to look closely, to see beneath the grime and dirt, to imagine, to see the ways in which God's love might be embodied, lived out in the lives of our brothers and sisters, in community and through cultures: Called to help others to see the possibilities, to imagine, and not infrequently to have the courage to imagine a richer, deeper reality. Discipling means seeking to embody the higher public good for God in particular situations and circumstances; it means shouldering responsibility for hope, for en-visioning the values of the Kingdom in the everyday, which may of course involve the hard work of scraping the canvas clean; of confronting those in power or making space in the centre for those at the margins.

There is no forgettable or dull stone in the mosaic that makes up the Kingdom of God; there is no fixed, inevitable way things have to be here on earth. We may like to pretend or choose to believe that nothing can change; that our social and cultural world is fixed – it is much easier that way:

But, whilst highly likely, it is not written in stone  
that tens of thousands in our world die of malnutrition or  
HIV/Aids each day,  
It is not written in stone that nations and communities must  
generate enemies to create their own solidarity and identity,  
It is not written in stone that the Middle Eastern crisis is  
irresolvable or that Arab cultures cannot be democratic  
Nor is it written in stone that I will always be coiled in a shels  
of loneliness or trapped by character or habit in the prison  
of myself – in this way or that

So, come Holy Spirit fill the hearts of your faithful and kindle in us the fire of your love, anchored in the Father, made manifest in the Son. Amen