



1st February 2009
The Presentation of Christ in the Temple
Choral Evensong
Psalm 137 vv. 1–9
Luke 15 vv. 1–10

Reading the Bible as...Prayer A Heavenly Carnival?

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As a child growing up in the West Indies, carnival was for me an explosion of colour, sound, dance, a country at play. I loved it then and I still love it now. It was a long time before I came to realize that there is a darker side to carnival: of Lords Misrule, when slaves became lords and ladies for a day, when the world was turned upside down, normal rules of engagement were suspended, and it sometimes seemed as if the underworld came up to the surface to mock, taunt and disorient us all.

Small wonder then that some Christian churches regard 'playing mas', or dancing in a Carnival band, as a sin worthy of banishment or excommunication. My own youth group threatened to walk out of church *en masse* the year we 'played mas' dressed as six foot butterflies. They were on to something: this *carne vale*, farewell to the flesh for 40 days, exposed us as beasts, the world as a jungle, life as dark and sinister. It subverted everything we thought we valued and understood; it undermined our confidence and it opened us to a new and untamed way of seeing.

The way in which Carnival has the power to crack us open in what St Paul might call a fleshly way, is strangely analogous to the power of the Bible to crack us open spiritually. Although the comparison is a violent one, it helps me to understand what is (or should be) happening when I read the Bible as prayer. I am often tempted to choose the scriptures which express my thoughts best, and tailor them to my needs. But when I allow the scriptures to speak for themselves, to turn me upside down and inside out, they then become the place where prayer really happens, a place of encounter with God where I am profoundly changed.

Today's two readings give us two distinct examples of how this happens, and in each I have chosen to be personal. Luke first. Luke's gospel provides us with a cluster of three parables in chapter 15: the lost sheep, the lost coin, and the lost or prodigal son. As a child, I learnt that the parable of the lost sheep gives us the Good Shepherd: as a child I knew that this was part of God's character. God the Father was like that; Jesus his Son was too. As a child I also understood that the Father in the parable of the Prodigal Son was like God the Father. It was a commonplace even then.

In between them, I read the story of the lost coin, and I knew from it that God rescues us, comes looking for us. It wasn't until I was in my thirties that this middle parable turned me upside down, and you may think me a slow learner. Parable 1: God is a noun: a Father. Parable 3: God is a noun: a Father. Parable 2: God is a verb – to rescue. Somehow, and I've lost the detailed memory, the light dawned. Parable 2: God is a noun: a Mother.

Since then, I've discovered Julian of Norwich and her rich description of Jesus as our mother. She says, 'our true mother, Jesus, he who is all love, bears us into joy and eternal life... The mother can lay the child tenderly to her breast, but our tender mother Jesus, he can familiarly lead us into his blessed breast through his sweet open side, and show within part of the godhead and the joys of heaven...' Since then, too, I've rehearsed all the arguments about the gender of God, I've risked preaching about 'our father mother God'. But it was the first moment when the scripture played carnival with me, that led me into a different kind of intimacy with the God whom I have loved and longed for most of my life. I met God that day in a new way; from an untamed reading of the parable came a new prayer.

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Psalm 137 is a different matter, much darker, ending on that deeply disturbing note: ‘Happy shall they be who take your little ones and dash them against the rock.’

As a fan of Bob Marley, I’ve long loved the song *By de rivers of Babylon, there I lay down...* (I’ll resist the temptation to begin singing it!) And as a lifelong Anglican, Coverdale’s translation is deep in my subconscious: ‘By the waters of Babylon we sat down and wept: when we remembered thee, O Sion. As for our harps, we hanged them up: upon the trees that are therein.’ But somehow, the last three verses never stuck. Did I blank them out? I don’t know: how could I remember my forgetting?

And then, when the Authorised Service Book came out in 1980, we all breathed a sigh of relief: now these impossible words were bracketed out, tamed out of recognition. I think it was the brackets that eventually shamed me, played a dark carnival poem in my mind.

*I speak the words that paint me
In a holy light
I shun the words that show me
Violence: my soul’s dark night.*

Slowly, over the years, I have found myself praying the whole psalm as words from God which unman me, take me into the darkness of my own sin, and perhaps more profoundly into the darkness of the world’s sin, bringing it face to face with a God who if he is mother and father surely wants my prayer to be filled with the voices of those whose children are ‘dashed against the rock’ – with the voices of the children themselves, of their parents and their communities. Thus far I can go.

I wonder also if in the depths of his mercy – and through the dark carnival colours of the psalm - God is not also asking me to fill my prayer with the voices of those who savage the children too, to walk away from the easy complacency of my alignment with the righteous, and self-righteous, who think well of the world, and mostly think of ourselves. If I am prepared to walk into the dark places of the scriptures, I may there meet the God who has come from light into darkness to redeem that darkness; I may meet him with those children, and those perpetrators of violence, at the cross.

This, I think, is why I have found this sermon hard to write. It’s been a struggle because I’m afraid that even in speaking these words, I’m in danger of taming the scriptures again, not least in the shadow of the last few weeks’ events in Gaza.

I wish at this point that I could suggest to you a technique for praying the scriptures in this way, but I can’t, because I can’t control them, and that’s the point. All I can do is make myself vulnerable, read the scriptures, and wait to see what happens. It is in making myself vulnerable to God (and the world) that prayer begins, and flourishes. So there are no techniques – I’ll end simply by giving you four simple invitations.

First, as you read the scriptures as prayer, I invite you to read **less knowingly**. As someone who’s been at ‘school’ for the last fifty-six years on and off, I can be obsessed with analysis, with understanding, with argument and debate, with knowledge, and there’s nothing wrong with that. But if scripture is the Word of God which draws me into a living relationship with God, then I must come to it at times less critically, with less certainty and fewer answers. It is not answers that I seek, but a conversation with God.

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Then, you might explore a **less hurried** reading, in the Benedictine tradition of *lectio divina*. In the measured rhythm of *lectio*, slow, repeated reading; of *meditatio*, considered, sometimes almost dreamlike listening to what has been read, in your thoughts, your affections, your spirit; we may perhaps more easily slip into *oratio* or prayer, leading in the end to *contemplation* – an enjoyment of the (sometimes felt, sometimes imagined) presence of God.

The invitation to read **in a more child-like fashion** is a reminder to me that though I must read the scriptures with integrity, there are many people who in critically misreading the Bible strangely meet God in ways that frankly make me quite jealous. As a teenager going on sick communion rounds with my father, we went into a shack in Trinidad to give the sacrament to Matilda Derrick. The single room was immaculate; she was dressed all in white, a little altar laid out in the middle. One of the candles had guttered with a wing pattern of wax down its side. As we entered, she said, ‘Look, Father, an angel has visited me.’ make of that what you will; I am still convinced that God can use Matilda’s childlikeness to meet her. So too with the scriptures: what people see in them sometimes stretches credulity; but in those incredible, childish readings God is to be found too.

More hungrily – maybe better, more expectantly. If you, like me, sat listening to the readings this evening with interest and careful thought, maybe when you return home, as you settle down to sleep, you might like to read them again, this time with Samuel’s prayer: *Master, speak, thy servant heareth.*