

Trinity 18 sermon by Andrew 20 Oct 2019 Lead kindly Light

Genesis 32: 22-31; 2 Tim 3: 14-4:5; Luke 18: 1-8

Just this time last week John Henry Newman, Cardinal Newman, author of hymns like “Lead kindly Light” and “Praise to the holiest” was made a saint of the Roman Catholic Church. Just as a matter of interest he’s already named in our calendar of saints and his day is the 11th of August.

Newman is a much-loved figure, both for his personal holiness and his brilliance as a preacher and a theologian. But maybe even more for the story of his struggle, his wrestling, like Jacob, through a long night of questioning where God wanted him to be and what God wanted him to do with his life.

Newman wanted the Church of England he was born into and in which he became a priest, he wanted the Church to have the passion, the love for Jesus of the apostles. He wanted the Church to be the Church of the saints and martyrs. In one of his sermons he says: “We ought to have the holiness of the apostles, following them as they followed Christ.” Not only that, he wanted to see joy in Christian disciples, who even, as they suffered – and as we suffer - find joy: he writes: “joy in all its forms, not only a pure heart, but also a cheerful countenance – as every part of the Gospels show us.”

Instead what he saw was a Church of England that was heavily identified with the State, the establishment (the Tory party at prayer). It was safe, it was faithful in its way, but to Newman it seemed dried up and passionless. Think of all those Jane Austen parsons with their secure livings, living off the patronage of the local squire.

By contrast he saw the Roman Catholic Church just beginning to re-establish itself in this country. And what he saw was a Church that was the Church of the poor, mainly serving Irish immigrants working on the railways and in the dockyards, poor men and their families. And their priests served them heroically often in cholera-ridden slums, and often paying the price for their faithfulness.

To Newman this looked like the faith of the apostles – heroically loving and costly. This was proclaiming the message, to use Paul’s words to Timothy, with your life, continuing to live out what you’ve learned no matter what the cost.

So the Church of England lost Newman for the same reason it had lost the Wesleys almost a hundred years before – because the institutional Church couldn’t cope with this kind of passion for Jesus. They’d sneered at the Wesleys for what they called “enthusiasm” – God forbid we should be enthusiastic - forgetting that the literal meaning of enthusiasm is to be “full of God.”

This was the struggle Newman put into the words of his hymn, “Lead kindly light”. “Lead kindly light amid th’ encircling gloom, lead thou me on; the night is dark and I am far from

home, lead thou me on. Keep thou my feet; I do not ask to see the distant scene; one step enough for me.”

Out of this struggle Newman would emerge, like Jacob, wounded but blessed. Wounded because his decision to join the Roman Catholic Church would cost him so much – his place in a Church he’d loved and served, it would cost him friends and family (he was shunned by many). And even worse he received a cold, suspicious kind of welcome from many in the Roman Catholic Church he now joined.

He couldn’t see the distant scene. He could only take step after step, following Jesus. But here, wounds notwithstanding, he’d find his blessing and be a blessing to so many and he’d serve out most of his life among the poor in Birmingham. And through his preaching and his writing he’d be able to express his passion for Jesus and his understanding of Christ’s passion for us. In the words of “Praise to the holiest” shown on our Lady Chapel windows, your struggles and mine, and Jacob’s, and the struggles of every human being are taken to the Cross: O generous love that he who smote in man for man the foe (the foe of all our conflicted hearts) the double agony in man for man should undergo. He goes on: And in the garden secretly and on the Cross on high should teach his brethren and inspire to suffer and to die.” Newman’s saying that your sufferings and mine – whatever we’re going through, they’re part of Gethsemane and they are utterly united with the sacrifice of the Cross.

These truths are the Passion of our faith in every sense and they’re a million miles away from that bloodless, passionless religion Newman tore himself away from, through great struggle, to find himself in a love affair with God – difficult, costly, sometimes lonely, but utterly sublime.

But even though he left the Anglican Church, it’s worth remembering that Newman’s influence echoed on in our Church in spite of his leaving, and very much so in our Scottish Episcopal Church. In the decades after him some of our most dedicated priests shared his passion, most famously Bishop Alexander Forbes of Dundee (who was taught by Newman) who faithfully visited his people in the Dundee’s slums where cholera was rife and when he died the people of the city lined the streets in their thousands.

And churches like ours were founded in that spirit – to be churches where Jesus is loved and people are loved, to be churches where there’s passion for the Gospel and the Gospel is proclaimed, again as Paul says, whether the times are favourable or unfavourable, with patience – and I would add, with joy. If Cardinal Newman, now sainted, and Bishop Forbes (also a saint in our calendar), if they were looking down on us now, and seeing us gather to break bread just as the apostles did, if they could see our gathering on Wednesdays also to share Communion and the Food Bank that flows from it, if they could see our longing to be faithful in this place, in this time, to share the Gospel with people with so many needs, in all our different kinds of poverty, they would smile on us and bless us.

This is the living faith of the apostles. This is the Passion of Jesus. Jesus asks: "And when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?" Lord Jesus, we pray that you will find faith among us, and love, and joy. Amen.