

## **SERMON 10/4/2016**

**Let us pray:**

**Dear God, may the words of my mouth and the thoughts of all our hearts do honour and glory to you, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.**

**Every Sunday, before our service here, while Richard builds the atmosphere with his prelude on the organ, the Minister (or a stand-in if he's away, as he is this weekend), gathers with the Elders in the Consistory Room for prayer. Then the Scriba leads him into church, and the rest of us follow, and take our seats in the front two pews on the flag side.**

**It's a bit of theatre that adds to the sense of occasion as we prepare to worship God; but it can have its down side, because it can look as if the Elders are showing off their exalted status in our community, and taking their seats at the front as a privilege of rank. No doubt there was a time when that was true, but let me assure you, that's not why we do it now. We do it so that members of the congregation, and visitors to the church, can see and know who we are, and to that end we also now have brief biographies with photographs in the vestibule, so that people can find out a bit more about us if they want to. And after the service we're here to answer questions if we can, to hear concerns and ideas that we might want to raise at our next meeting, but also to listen to anyone who might want to talk about a personal problem, or a matter of faith.**

There are any number of reasons why someone might feel more comfortable talking to a particular one of us rather than to any of the others or to the Minister, and a few personal details about us can only help. But they will probably make that choice overwhelmingly because of our faces, and here the photographs can be nothing more than a rough guide. For it is only when we see a face animated by personality that we can start to get an idea of what lies behind it, and guess at what level of empathy might already be there. But all our faces are human and flawed in different ways, and all tell a story in a foreign language, awaiting translation through familiarity and fellowship.

Now the picture on the front of your liturgy sheet this morning is a bit more interesting than any of our Consistory snap-shots. It is El Greco's depiction of the Apostles Peter and Paul, as they plan the spreading of the Word. It was painted in 1592, and it's on loan until next month at our own Hermitage here in Amsterdam, from its vast sister museum in St Petersburg, as part of the Spanish Masters exhibition, and if you've never seen it, I urge you to go and do so, because no reproduction can do it justice. Here Peter looks at Paul, but Paul looks outward, not at us, but beyond us, and his eyes are ten miles deep. For what a story is told in that face!

When we first encounter Saul of Tarsus he is a bystander relishing the spectacle of a Christian, Stephen, being stoned to death by the mob. And here he finds what he thinks is his mission. An educated and articulate man, a Pharisee and a Roman citizen, he will devote his considerable energy to stamping out this cult of the

Nazarene, that insults both the priests and the colonial government by preaching of an otherworldly kingdom, before it corrupts his ancient faith and brings down the wrath of the empire upon its people. So far these followers of Jesus have been dealt with only piece-meal, in occasional, hot-blooded frustration with their effrontery. But Saul's approach is cold and systematic, a house-to-house cleansing of the city that drives most of the brethren beyond its limits, and the rest underground. Then he asks for, and receives, the necessary authority to hunt them down in Damascus, and bring them as prisoners back to Jerusalem for trial.

He is almost there, when the unthinkable happens: a blinding flash of light, and a voice saying "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?" and Saul says "Who are you, Lord?" Well, the answer might seem, as it were, blindingly obvious to us, but the truth, to Saul, is too bizarre not to be questioned. Surely this can't be happening? But it is.

Before his sight is restored Saul has a symbolic three days to consider his position. For a start, instead of entering Damascus as a powerful instrument of justice, he is led there, helpless, and at the mercy of people who have every reason to tear him limb from limb. But more than that, this man who has acted with such unshakeable pride and confidence in his intellect, his learning, his zeal and his righteousness, has to come to terms with the fact that at no point in the recorded history of his people has anyone got it so completely wrong. And as though this is not humbling enough, eventually Ananias, who has been understandably reluctant to confront this monster of whom he has heard so much, looks at the face of his

enemy, with its open, unseeing eyes, and begins their first meeting with those blessed words, “Brother Saul”. Then Saul begins to understand what these people are all about, and regains his sight looking into the face of the first Christian he has ever regarded without hatred. The word “conversion” doesn’t begin to cover it.

All this El Greco brings to his painting; the guilt, the sorrow, the haunting memory of wilful, murderous sin for which only Christ can atone, even the apostle’s robes, the colour of old, dried blood not his own, that he must carry with him always. But the artist doesn’t have to stop there, and we can also see the life of Paul beyond the start of his mission, the anguish and fear attendant on knowing that he has been proud again, believing he will escape death in the imminent return of the Lord, only to have to accept that he was wrong. He looks past us and past the moment in which we see him, to his own martyrdom, and through the centuries of challenge and torment still to come.

Of course El Greco had no more idea than we do of what Paul actually looked like, but this masterpiece becomes even more interesting when we consider that the face is not an invention, but that of the artist himself. He did this a lot, as many painters have, for, just as a great actor can take on the experience and personality of a character, so a great artist can invest with any suitable face the history and emotions of their subject. So this is not narcissism we’re looking at here, it’s not some 16<sup>th</sup> Century selfie of the artist with St Peter. The fact that it’s cheaper to use a mirror than to hire a model to sit still by the hour might have had something to do with it, but El Greco was clearly very comfortable using his own features for this subject,

maybe because he felt an affinity with the apostle. Like Paul, he was a one-off, and like Paul was strong and stubborn in his views. But also, in his treatment of Paul, he is crafting, from his own, the face of a man who has known the terror of sudden blindness, which must be every painter's greatest fear. So maybe Paul was special to El Greco in this personal way; but the artist also used himself as a model for other subjects whose true likenesses he had never seen; most notably Christ Himself.

This brings us to our second reading this morning, in which John describes the third appearance of Jesus to the disciples after his Resurrection. There is much here that bears on St Paul's conversion, for as Peter is told he will be, Paul was led by the hand somewhere he didn't want to go, and even though it marked the start of his Christian mission it was also, inevitably, the first step on the road to imprisonment and almost certainly to martyrdom. Also, we can see in this miracle of the abundant catch taken from the other side of the boat a symbolic prefiguring of the mission to the gentiles. There is also Peter making up for his denial of Jesus after his arrest with a three-fold profession of his devotion, and his commission to take over as shepherd to the Christian flock. None of this is problematic. What is puzzling is the reaction of these disciples to Jesus when they see him. We are told that it is after day-break, and these men have been the constant companions of someone they love and worship through most of his ministry, so their failure to recognise him, even from a hundred yards out, seems a little far-fetched. But when they've landed the fish, and he's there inviting them to take breakfast, as verse 12

puts it “none of the disciples dared to ask him ‘Who are you?’ because they knew it was the Lord.” What can that mean?

Now we can fiddle around with rational explanations, like the dawn mist or the smoke from the fire interfering with their vision. I’ve even heard it advanced that these men only went into fishing in the first place because their eyesight wasn’t good enough for them to be craftsmen. This is desperate nonsense.

Surely the truth is that they knew who he was, but not from his face, because his face now told a story that had never been heard before, in a language no one had ever known, a story of protracted agony and death, and descent into hell and resurrection. But there’s more to it than that, because all our faces bear the marks of our failures, our sins, and all were borne by Christ on the cross. So the crooked lines and distortions that disfigure the faces of the callous fraud and the unloving lover, the petty cheat and the cold assassin, of the greedy and the spiteful, of Saul of Tarsus and you and me, have scarred the holy face in its torture, and been scoured clean in a single act of repentance and reconciliation with the Father, a revolution of the human will in God made man that blew hell wide open, darkened the sky and rocked the world between. That is what Jesus has been through. No wonder even his closest friends don’t recognise him.

And this is where our story as Christians really begins, with the knowledge that we do not know the face of Christ, and that to serve him we must see his face in everyone we meet, even the persecutor, even the executioner. That is a hard enough task, but it carries with

it one that is even harder, which is to see Christ even in ourselves.

Jesus commanded us to love our neighbour as ourselves, but what if we don't much like what we are? We all dislike in other people the things we secretly dislike about us, and people who find it difficult to love are always unhappy about what lurks inside them. But loving ourselves doesn't mean self-love, not selfish, uncritical pride in our own virtue or vice. It means knowing that we are precious to God, that we are loved and enjoy his mercy whatever our faults. And if we can look in the mirror and see past our careless inadequacies and our guilt at what we are and have been, if we can see ourselves forgiven and redeemed in the face of Christ, we have no choice but to love all the faces around us. Amen.