

The confidence of faith

I may be showing my age here, but I wonder how many of you know the name Jusuf Cat Stevens. In those far off days when I was growing up Jusuf Cat Stevens was just known as Cat Stevens and was a musician and singer famous for outstanding records like 1970's Tea for the Tillerman – an album which has been in the news in recent days as it has been re-recorded and re-released in celebration of its 50th anniversary. Cat Stevens, however, became Jusuf Cat Stevens because in 1977 he converted to Islam, changed his name and completely renounced his musical career, selling his guitars and disappearing from public view. Thankfully for music lovers, he eventually returned to music and hence his recent re-recording of this classic album. But Jusuf Cat Stevens is an example of what conversion to religious faith can do to you. It can cause you to so re-evaluate your life that you renounce and throw away everything that once seemed essential to you.

Well, as we read our passage from Paul's letter to the Church in Philippi this morning we find something quite similar. In Paul's case it is not quite true to say that he had undergone a conversion. Paul had been brought up a devout Jew. His whole life revolved around his faith and he was a member of a zealous religious brotherhood known as the Pharisees, who were rigorously devoted to keeping God's law. Indeed such was Paul's zeal for his Jewish faith that he brutally persecuted a growing movement of people who claimed that the long-awaited Jewish Messiah had finally come – in the figure of an executed criminal, Jesus of Nazareth. Such a belief was anathema to Paul and he persecuted these blasphemers ruthlessly – until that same executed criminal appeared to him on the road to Damascus in a dazzling vision and called him into his service. What happened then was not exactly a conversion: he did not renounce his Jewish faith, but concluded rather that it had taken a most decisive turn, and that for which Jews had been awaiting and longing for centuries had finally arrived in this figure of Jesus. The effect on Paul, however, was similar to Cat Steven's conversion: a complete re-evaluation of his life. Certain things that had once been of central importance now no longer mattered; things of which he was proud now meant nothing; things which once gave him great confidence now needed to be jettisoned, thrown away.

So in our passage today Paul reflects on all the things he once took pride in, all the things at which he excelled: 'circumcised on the eighth day, a member of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of the Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless...' These were the jewels in the crown that Paul wore proudly: the things that gave him respect, the things that gave him his identity and standing in life. But now he had met Christ, and just listen again to how he now viewed these things: 'yet whatever gains I had, these I have come to regard as loss because of Christ. More than that, I regard everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord...' And he goes on: 'For his sake I suffered the loss of all things and I regard them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ...'

Now, we have to note the strength of Paul's language here. The word translated, 'rubbish' means waste, and that can mean dung, or human waste: we might paraphrase Paul by saying that he considers all this stuff that he used to value so much as bullshit, to use somewhat un-churchy language. And maybe that is why St Francis, whose feast day is celebrated today, as we heard earlier, referred to money as 'dung' and viewed it as unclean and defiling: something that was his inheritance due from his wealthy father, something that would have shaped his life and identity, he regarded as dung now that he had met Christ. And that is evidently how Paul felt about everything that once made him what he was: it's all a pile of bull, as we might say -though I doubt that even Jusuf Cat Stevens would have put it that strongly.

I want, however, to pause and consider this a bit more deeply for a few moments this morning. What are we to make of what Paul is saying here? Certainly it speaks volumes about the impact Christ made in his life. It certainly testifies eloquently to the power of the Gospel: that

blinding light that shone on Paul on the Damascus Road seems to have thrown everything else into shadow. Nothing else mattered any more. But is this how we want to view our lives? Does Christ come to relegate all that we are to garbage in the light of his glory? Does Christ come to consume us in this way? Indeed does this not sound a bit like fanaticism, the kind of extremism that gives religion a bad name, where religious passion relegates everything else to rubbish, garbage, dung? Does this not depreciate the world, as religion all too often does?

Well, I would suggest that to understand this passage aright we need to make a distinction: a distinction between things that give us confidence in the world, and things that give us confidence before God – and let me explain what I mean. You see, I would suggest that there are things about our lives that give us a strength and confidence as we face life. For example, if we belong to a nation with a proud history; or if we belong to a family that has given us a good education and some wisdom for how to live well; or if we are fortunate to have a job where our gifts and abilities can find expression and fulfilment; or if we happen to be good at something, maybe sport or art or music; or if we are fortunate in love and friendships: sadly, not everyone is blessed in these ways, but where we are so blessed these are things that are to be cherished. They enhance life. And when the light of Christ shines upon us these things are not eclipsed, or banished. They do not become garbage or dung because Jesus is so wonderful. This is not what Paul is referring to when he speaks of ‘being confident in the flesh’. Far from it. These are things that are to be affirmed and treasured as evidence of the undeserved grace of God, and if they give us grounds for confidence for living in the world – well, we need all the confidence we can get.

What Paul, however, is saying is that these things are not grounds for confidence before God. It’s not which nation you happen to come from, and it’s not how talented or gifted you are, and it’s not how big your bank balance is. It’s not even what how good person you are. God is not influenced by these things. They carry no weight, they do not sway God. In fact, if anything, God has a particular bias towards those who are not blessed in these ways: the poor, the despised, those who can find very little confidence to see them through life. God’s love reaches out to all, regardless – and indeed it is tilted especially towards those who have been dealt a rubbish hand by life.

Now, this is the issue that Paul is addressing here. You see in Paul’s world there was a mistaken belief that certain things gave you grounds for pride and confidence before God: being a Jew above all: being a member of the nation that had been entrusted with God’s law. Being circumcised. These were believed to give you a privileged place in God’s affections. And Paul is saying that if you believe that, as he once did – then you better consign all these things to the garbage heap, to the toilet. They’re rubbish. As we stand before God, the only thing that gives us confidence is the unshakeable love of God that has grasped us in Jesus Christ. And that is a love that drives us on and that we reach out for even as we face the blows that assail us in life – even being imprisoned and facing the prospect of execution as Paul was as he wrote this letter.

So if you are blessed by life, then be grateful and count your blessings. Cherish them and let them give you whatever confidence they afford you. But as we stand before God there is only God’s love and grace and mercy, demonstrated in Christ. This is the gift, the prize, towards which our lives are directed.

All this is beautifully expressed as we gather around this table here today. We come here stripped of all that that the world has given us. We come naked, empty-handed, with nothing that might set us apart or privilege us. And there is a special place here for those whom life has drained of confidence. Come, and eat and drink. Feast on God’s love and be filled, and find the strength that only God can give. Amen.

Almighty and gracious God,
Holy and loving maker and sustainer of all that is,
we bow before you today in praise and worship.
We come a people who have been greatly blessed:
blessed with the gift of life, blessed with many privileges,
blessed with so much that enriches our lives:
we praise you for the abilities and talents you have given us,
the relationships that season our lives,
the beauties of the world that surround us
and that bring such joy.
We give thanks to you, gracious giver.
O God forgive us that we take so much for granted.
Sometimes it takes the loss of things we value
to make us appreciate them.
Sometimes it takes a crisis to turn us back to you,
who we have turned away from.
Hear us once more as we confess our sins,
our spurning of your gifts,
our trashing of this wonderful world
and the miracles of nature and creation,
our cruelty and destruction of our fellow creatures.
Forgive us. Have mercy upon us.
Come, we pray and meet us as we gather in worship.
Come and unite us, even as we are scattered
And prevented from meeting face to face.
Come to us and meet us around this table,
even as we gather in our homes,
and feed us, and fill us, and renew us
With the gift of eternal life.
And so may we find strength to live in difficult times.
We pray in the name of Jesus, the Saviour,
and we pray together in the words he taught us...