

Sunday 15th December 2013

St Barnabas, E17

Advent Three: Courage

Today is the third Sunday of Advent. It is sometimes called “Gaudate Sunday” because of an ancient tradition that the opening, sung words on this Sunday are the words ‘*Gaudete in Domino semper*’ which in English is ‘Rejoice in the Lord always’. We might also then call today “Rejoice Sunday”. It is a turning point in Advent from the more sombre preparation thus far, to a more upbeat sense that our Lord’s approach is now really drawing near...just ten days till Christmas...and this upbeat, lighter tone is also marked by using rose as a lighter liturgical colour, hence the pink vestments we are wearing today. It’s as if we can rest a bit at this stage in Advent, but there is no rest from the Advent themes upon which I have been preaching.

For those who’ve travelled with my Advent sermons so far, you will remember that on Advent Sunday I preached on...faith..., that last Sunday I preached on ...hope..., that we will come to think on peace and joy next Sunday and on Christmas Day but that today it is the turn of...courage! The overall message is this: in Advent we wait in faith for the

God who comes to us and works from within the brokenness of our world to bring healing and justice. That, I have been saying, is what gives us hope that the world can change. That is what gives us the courage to co-operate with God. That is why we work for peace in expectation of the joy to come.

Today then we think on Courage! Let me share some words on courage from The Wizard of Oz. It is the so-called cowardly Lion who says,

'Courage! What makes a King out of a slave?

Courage! What makes the flag on the mast to wave?

Courage! What makes the elephant charge his tusk, in the misty mist or the dusky dusk?

What makes the muskrat guard his musk?

Courage! What makes the sphinx the seventh wonder?

Courage! What makes the dawn come up like thunder?

Courage! What makes the Hottentot so hot? What puts the "ape" in apricot?'

What have they got that I ain't got?'

...'Courage!'....'you can say that again!'

What does courage mean for us as Christians? In the Christian tradition, courage, or fortitude, is regarded as one

of the seven gifts of the Holy Spirit. The catechism of the Catholic Church describes it thus: 'with the gift of fortitude/courage, we overcome our fear and are willing to take risks as a follower of Jesus Christ. A person with courage is willing to stand up for what is right in the sight of God, even if it means accepting rejection, verbal abuse, or physical harm. The gift of courage allows people the firmness of mind that is required both in doing good and in enduring evil'.

Of course courage is not unique to Christians and Thomas Aquinas warned that courage without justice is an occasion of injustice, whereby a strong person can use their courage to oppress someone who is weaker... something we see when a boss, a bully or a dictator uses courage in the wrong way. For Christians, however, courage is to wedded to justice and to be a tool for living the Christian life, enduring evil at times, speaking and acting for justice at times, at times standing firm in one's faith even in the face of opposition.

Courage is often linked with prophecy, with the prophetic voice of the one who speaks out against injustice. On this Sunday we remember John the Baptist as the one who prepares the way for Jesus. Jesus himself speaks of John

as we heard in our gospel reading, "What did you go out into the wilderness to look at? A reed shaken by the wind? What then did you go out to see? Someone dressed in soft robes? Look, those who wear soft robes are in royal palaces. What then did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. This is the one about whom it is written, "See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way before you." John was a person of courage. It was John who spoke out against King Herod when Herod married his deceased brother's wife, something explicitly forbidden in Jewish law. It was his courage in speaking out that led to John's imprisonment. And contrast his courage with the moral weakness, the lack of courage showed by Herod when he agreed to his wife's sick request via her daughter, for the head of John the Baptist on a platter.

Courage is associated with the prophets and courage is associated with the martyrs. One of my favourite saints is the martyr St Perpetua, an amazing example of courage. Perpetua showed the courage of total commitment to God and she was willing, if not eager, to bear the cost of discipleship. At the age of 22 she started her preparation for baptism, she became a catechumen. But Carthage, in the year 203, was a dangerous place for catechumens. The

Emperor Septimus Severus had forbidden fresh conversions to Christianity; when Perpetua and her four companions became catechumens, they rendered themselves liable to the death penalty. Perpetua refused to denounce her faith and she was indeed sentenced to death. As part of the entertainment at the local amphitheatre, Perpetua was thrown into the arena to be mauled by wild animals. However, she was so caught up in religious ecstasy that she didn't even notice when she was tossed about by a mad cow! Having survived the wild animals, she was to be finished off by a gladiator. When he hesitated, she joyfully guided his knife into her own throat. Now that's what's I call courage, the courage of the martyr!

Courage is associated with the prophets, with the martyrs and, indeed, with heroes of our own time. Today the world witnesses the burial of Nelson Mandela, a man of courage if ever there was one. He not only showed courage in opposing Apartheid but he also showed courage in leading the new South Africa with a spirit of peace and reconciliation. No one expected that and it took enormous courage for Mandela to tread that path and show that kind of leadership. That kind of courage, moral courage, courage wedded to justice is what changes the world for the better, what transforms our sorrows and struggles into the peace

and joy of transformation.

I often think that moral courage is lacking in today's world, and not least in the leadership of the Church. So often I see leaders anxious to protect their own interests or the interests of the institution that they neglect to speak-out for and stand-up for those who are vulnerable. So often I have seen that kind of moral cowardliness and it can be pretty depressing! But thanks be to God for the new Pope! What a courageous moral leader he is! Here is someone who identifies with those who are vulnerable, who wants the Church to be a Church not only for the poor but of the poor! Here is a Pope who received huge criticism for washing the feet of Muslim convicts on Maundy Thursday and for going to Lampedusa island to show his support for refugees. Thanks be to God for Pope Francis and may his moral leadership inspire all church leaders to re-assess the extent to which they show moral courage.

Courage is for the prophets, courage is for the martyrs, courage is for great leaders and great popes...but courage is also for all of us. We may just be thinking that we don't have courage, that we can leave it to others, that like the cowardly lion we can hide behind others who've got what we haven't got.

Well maybe we do not all need to show courage to the same degree in all circumstances and maybe it is for some more than others to show courage in the midst of their Christian discipleship, but all of us I suggest should be prepared to show courage as and when circumstances dictate. I am sure we all find ourselves at times going along with a conversation, perhaps with malicious gossip or someone's expression of prejudice, feeling uneasy but lacking the courage to speak out. Or perhaps we find ourselves in a situation where a people are being bullied at work or school and we lack the courage to do something about it. Or perhaps we lack the courage to be honest about who we are with others. I am reminded of an organisation for gay Christians which was called "courage" and gave people tortured by anxieties the courage to come out as gay. Courage can manifest itself in all sorts of ways.

In the New Testament, the word courage occurs only 9 times. Jesus uses it to say to his disciples, 'take courage, do not be afraid', Paul uses it in 1 Corinthians to encourage us to be firm on our faith, it is used once each in Philipians and Hebrews, and then it occurs four of those nine times in the Acts of the Apostles and my favourite use of it is this from Acts 4: 13, 'When they saw the courage of Peter and

John and realized that they were unschooled, ordinary men, they were astonished and they took note that these men had been with Jesus': Unschooled, ordinary people, who had been with Jesus. Courage therefore is for all Christians...it doesn't require an education, it isn't for special people, it is just for people who like his first disciples and like us today have been with Jesus.

Staying close to Jesus is what can give us confidence that we will use courage when we need it. We do not need a Dorothy to convince us that we are not cowardly lions after all... all we need to do is receive courage as a gift of the Holy Spirit and use it to co-operate with God in playing our part in the transformation of the world.

Steven Saxby, December 2013.