

Angela Tilby

5th Sunday after Trinity

2 Kings 5.1-14, Galatians 6.1-17, Luke 10:1-11, 16-20

Last Saturday on our parish pilgrimage we had a midday Eucharist in the Church of the Ascension, Bedmond in Hertfordshire. This 'tin tabernacle' as such churches are sometimes called had once been destined for the colonies, but for some reason never got there and so was plonked down to serve as a daughter church to St Lawrence, Abbots Langley. As we had walked a steep mile from the grandeur of the parish church to the outpost on the hill we decided to sing, 'One more step along the world I go'. If you have never sung this your children, grandchildren or god-children probably have, its tune is so instantly memorable and its words are so lacking in mention of doctrine or scripture that it solves head teachers' assembly issues at one stroke.

I met its author once, Sydney Carter, a strange, awkward fidgety man who couldn't quite look you in the eye either for shyness or because he wanted to say something really shocking – but put a percussion instrument in his hand and he immediately relaxed as he found a rhythm. He is the author of Lord of the Dance which we sing now and then, a song as sung by Christ, 'They cut me down and I leap up high'. Not 'but I leap up high' – notice its 'and' – 'I am the life that'll never die'. Sydney Carter found moments of paradox in the Christian faith he only half accepted. He always knew that these paradoxes were really important. That is where the life is: 'All the new things that I see you'll be looking at along with me'.

Today's readings invite us to take one more step along the world on that paradoxical way that we call Christian faith. 'From the old things to the new, keep me travelling along with you'. Old to new is here in the story of the Syrian commander Naaman. What would Naaman have done without his Hebrew slave girl? All his greatness and his clout, could not save him from the humiliation of leprosy, but she, the least of his household gave him hope. When Bible stories like this were regularly taught in school that figure of the slave girl gave aspirations to schoolgirls who often I suspect in an earlier era felt pretty powerless – and here she is the pivot of the whole plot. The rest is just the bluster of the powerful, Naaman's letter from the King of Aram, the terror it inspires in the king of Israel, Naaman's dramatic advance on the prophet's house and the prophet's haughty refusal to meet him....everyone is standing on their high horse except the household servants whom you can't help feeling have learnt something from the Hebrew slave girl and gently persuade the great commander to simply do what he was told. And we know the result, 'his flesh was restored like the flesh of a young boy, and he was clean'.

'You are older than the world can be, you are younger than the life in me'. More Sydney Carter paradoxes. 'They cut me down and I leap up high', 'and', not 'but' because the cutting down which we would think is the moment of defeat is in the fact the moment of liberation. Naaman's humiliation in the waters of the Jordan is where he is made young again. The way down is the way up.

You can sense a kind of struggle going on in Paul as he writes to his Galatian converts. They are not doing very well in their new Christian faith but seem to want to take refuge in an over prescriptive religiosity dominated by the Jewish ritual law. Paul has to get through to them and we see at the end of his letter that he abandons his scribe and scrawls away in his own big letters. Don't go for show, he says, don't do what others think you should. Look at these big letters. They take up a lot of space but that is not because I am good at writing, but because I am bad at it. Don't trust

in scrupulosity or let others congratulate you for it. There is nothing to gloat in except – and here comes the paradox – that symbol of shame and humility, the cross of Christ.

Paul is I suppose the first of the disciples and missionaries of the Christian faith to present the cross as a mystical symbol. But he wasn't the first to find meaning in the cruciform shape. On every temple I visited on my recent visit to Egypt I found carved into granite walls, painted on ceilings and tombs, etched into precious metals - the ringed key-shaped cross known as the ankh. It is held in the hands of the gods, it is brought to the lips of the dead to bring them safely through into the afterlife. Thousands of years before Christ the paradoxes of death into life, old into new were recognized and celebrated. Paul confronts the over anxious Galatians with the cross and only the cross. Not their own rigorous obedience or spiritual intensity but the cross. Can they live, dare they live, as though Christ had been raised from the dead. 'I am the life that will never, never die'.

In our Gospel Jesus sends seventy disciples stepping along the world as heralds to announce that the kingdom has come. When they return from their mission he welcomes them back, listens to their stories and confirms what has happened to them and through them. The sick are healed. Demons are cast out. The citadels of evil have been shaken. Satan has fallen from heaven.

But the seventy were not sent out on their mission armed to the teeth with weapons and spells and texts and religious tracts. In fact they are sent absolutely without resources, 'like lambs in the midst of wolves'. They have no purse, no bag, no sandals. No food, no money, no provisions. They have nothing to give but the Gospel and nothing they can demand in return. They are simply to travel hopefully relying that some doors at least will be open to them, food will be offered and there'll be somewhere to sleep. All they have to give in return is peace of the Lord and the power of his name, and sharing that peace and in naming that name the kingdom of God comes near.

Sometimes it becomes obvious that the Christian life is much simpler than we think. It is always our desire to complicate things, to schematize the mystery and so to get it under our control. But what we are asked to do is essentially to trust that in each step along the world the living Christ walks with us. 'Give me courage when the world is rough, keep me loving though the world is tough, leap and sing in all I do. Keep me travelling along with you'.

'All must test their own work...all must carry their own loads', says Paul in Galatians. He is urging his disciples to be responsible, not shifting the blame when things go wrong, not taking the credit for others' achievements. It could sound like doctrine of Thatcherite self-sufficiency. But that is to ignore what comes a few verses earlier where Paul says exactly and precisely the opposite, 'Bear one another's burdens and so fulfil the law of Christ'. The life that Christ lives in us multiplies as it is shared. In the body of Christ none are too small or too young or too weak or too old to bear the cross. And all must, because this is where the life is. We are marked with Christ's cross, not just for ourselves but for one another, for our friends and for strangers, for enemies, for the dead and the unborn and for the whole of creation. And so we bear our own cross as faithfully as we can. And we bear one another's as lovingly as we can.