Service of Commissioning CITI

Wednesday 4th October 2023, week of The Seventeenth Sunday after Trinity

Readings: Exodus 17.1-7; psalm 78.1-4, 12-16; Philippians 2.1-13; St Matthew 21.23-32

Exodus 17.1: *From the wilderness of Sin, the whole congregation of the Israelites journeyed by stages, as the Lord commanded …*

Moses and the children of Israel are making their way through the desert. They have gone as far as Rephidim where there is no water for the people to drink. They are smart enough to know that prophecy in and of itself does not produce drinking water and they are not slow to pass their wisdom on to Moses. These people are pragmatists with little time for theology and its intricacies. Moses, we know, is prophet as well as pastor. Moses feels that he has no option but to listen to God, to take some of the elders of Israel with him and to strike the rock at Horeb with the stick he used to strike The River Nile. The guiding hand of God, through Moses, stops the flow of water at The Nile and facilitates the flow of water at The Rock at Horeb for the welfare of his people and their livestock. However, Moses feels he has no option but to call the place: Massah and Meribah. This is etched for ever in Holy Scripture in the book Exodus *because the Israelites quarrelled and tested the Lord, saying, Is the Lord among us or not?* (Exodus 17.7)

In Jerusalem we meet another prophet called Jesus of Nazareth. The same type of question: *Is the Lord among us or not?* is being asked here, this time again by the children of Israel, the chief priests and the elders of the people. Their negativity is more targeted. It focuses on whether God Incarnate has a divine or a human mandate to teach. It is a bold and a daring swipe and strike. This Lord God does not speak through a prophetic intermediary, however. He speaks for himself. And he does get crucified for it. He has handled people like this before, so he turns the tables on them, as one day in the future he will overturn their tables of self-interest in front of their very eyes. He asks them: *Did the baptism of John come from heaven, or was it of human origin?* One assumes that not even they were impressed by their answer: *We do not know*. Gospel and goodness continue in uneasy dis-ease.

Let us take a turn, however, to the fledgling Ecumenical Project of Deep Kenosis. Theological understanding has long ago moved from denominational certainty to ecumenical adventure. The members nonetheless feel very comfortable in being equipped to serve God and their neighbour in their own inherited or personally chosen tradition. And this is as it should be. The Project has an institution, indeed an Institute, where such matters form the daily bread of community and of learning. Its members are currently exploring what St Paul felt that the inhabitants of the city of Philippi needed to hear. Like Prophet Moses, St Paul tended to skate on thin ice. Theologically astute, pastorally responsible, prophetically fearless, he felt that they deserved to know the mind of God because, even though they kept writing difficult letters to him, he sensed deep down they really wanted to make the best of the somewhat explosive life in the resurrection that Jesus Christ had left his church. It long ago had become apparent to those of The Institute of Great Prayer and Long Study that what fires St Paul is problems, that he simply does not sound off for the sake of it. It is not about the internal complexities of an organization in deep turmoil because of falling numbers or crumbling social status. It is about faith, belief, knowledge and understanding. – and once again faith. It is about what a later generation will call: *lex orandi, lex credenda, lex vivendi.*

St Paul is clear that he needs to help to correct an imbalance in understanding itself, however unpopular it is. St Paul, through individual experience, through theological study and through personal insight into how God on earth lived and worked, has come up with the one word: *kenosis* (self-emptying) to describe who Christ Jesus was and what he did. And he knew that it had to do with the mind every bit as much as with the heart: *Let the same* ***mind*** *be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness.* (Philippians 2.5, 6) But St Paul is not so self-important as not to see that a latter-day Christian, an Anglican-Methodist called Charles Wesley, understood *kenosis* even better than he did. In the heavenly choir, he has heard strains of Wesley’s hymn including the phrase: … *emptied himself of all but love …,* and has said to himself: Yes, this person got it more spot on than I did. Ah well, you are never too everlasting to learn, he concludes, and you can always teach even an old saint new tricks.

The students in The Institute of Great Prayer and Long Study are being prepared, and are preparing one another by collaborative learning, to work wherever God calls them to go and to be. Some will work in The Suburbs of Poverty and Exclusion, some in The Inner City of Disadvantage and Addiction. They are being commissioned in The Institute to serve as Student Readers in the diocese in which they live and they are passionate about wanting to share this teaching on *kenosis.* It forms the heartbeat of their faith and practice. Its generosity and realism combined, along with more prayer and further study, will enable them graciously to confront and correct the misunderstandings and impetuosities of those who remain irritated by many aspects of any and every diocese and indeed by the direction in which the Church of Long Standing is going. This is because they know deep down that all these people are souls for whom Christ died. It will do so because *kenosis* connects them directly with the God of Israel and with God Incarnate. As they call on God, they call also on something of which their predecessors knew all too little, however: collaborative ministry. Some of them have even gone so far as to discern that the laity are intrinsic to The Eucharistic Thanksgiving that lies at the core of their response through Holy Scripture to the resurrection of The Incarnate Christ. Daunted by the prospect, they remain rather excited by it. They are always keen to share whatever God gives to them.

Exodus 17.5: *The Lord answered Moses, Go forward ahead of the people; take with you some of the elders of Israel and bring along the staff with which you struck the Nile.*

It may indeed be as good as it gets, but it may actually be the real deal …