

Tenth Sunday after Trinity 2015 (Evensong)

Hebrews 12: 1 – 17

I don't know if you're familiar with the C18th novel, Tom Jones by Henry Fielding. It's a rumbustious tale of innocent frolicking in haystacks with wenches. Everybody seems to have a name which somehow describes them. It seems to be a confection of C18th literature. So the squire who is the benign patron of the eponymous hero is Squire Allworthy. The lithesome curate is called Mr Supple. And the school master is called Thwackum.

It's a reflection on the traditions of classroom management in particular and of society's attitudes in general that all so often discipline is associated with sadism. As soon as the writer of the letter to the Hebrews – whoever that was; and quite simply, nobody knows - but as soon as the writer to the Hebrews starts talking about God disciplining us the way a father disciplines his sons, quite unsavoury

caricature of God emerges. I'm not quite sure why. I have no recollection of my father ever beating me but I immediately think of somebody flexing a cane relishing the thought of having the opportunity to beat somebody.

That's a very primitive view of what God is like: an old man in the sky just waiting to catch us out, who must either be placated or humoured. But it's very pervasive. Certainly it's the image of the God militant atheists seem to think Christians believe in; and, actually, in our more neurotic moments it's the image of the God we do believe in.

We seem always so keen to be creating rules for God to be enforcing; to be imposing conditions which must be met before God's grace can be received; and to be erecting barriers that separate people from God's love. It's so simple and yet it seems so difficult to accept that love wins.

But none of this means that the formation of Christian discipleship is simple. Because it isn't. It's nothing short of a lifetime's work. It begins with commitment. And without an intentional decision to be someone, every aspect of whose life is centred on and characterised by a devotion to God, discipleship doesn't get started. God is calling. And each of us must decide: are we in or out of this being a Christian business?

And then it takes the application of every resource we have at our disposal to learn about God and to grow closer to him. That means studying: it means reading; it means listening; it means thinking; it means discussing. It's about immersing ourselves in the scriptures, becoming increasingly familiar with them and letting them lead us deeper and deeper into their treasure.

It's about getting stuck into journeying in faith with other disciples. This isn't always all that glamorous,

and not always even religious. It to do with being involved in a common enterprise. Carrying tables, stacking chairs, washing up, mowing lawns, cleaning gutters: this is the stuff of building up our common life and serving the kingdom. Attending public worship is essential, but it's only part of the story.

But attending public worship is essential. It creates our habits. But that is to say more than doing things out of routine. Worship, perhaps more than anything else, operates at a subconscious level to mould our attitudes and dispositions, our inclinations and our instinctive responses to be directed by God. Choice of newspapers probably works in a similar manner. If I talk about "the unemployed", whether you instinctively think about feckless scroungers or victims of systemic economic injustice is probably determined by whether you read the Daily Mail or the Guardian. Similarly, our very outlook on life is shaped by the dispositions created by worship. It just permeates our souls.

The Revd Matthew Pollard, Rector of Bridlington Priory

And of course there's the cultivation of an awareness of God. Personal prayer, meditation, fasting: these cultivate a mindfulness and draw us closer to him.

All I'm doing is listing Christian disciplines. And it's not an exhaustive list I'm creating. Hours upon hours could be spent on talking about different Christian disciplines and how they promote discipleship. My point is only to draw attention to that: that our discipleship requires us to submit ourselves to significant and complex disciplines.

None of these disciplines are about us being subject to a sadistic God. They are about creating the techniques of knowing God's love more fully. They are positive, they are constructive; they are things to be encouraged about. The very framework of the exhortation to discipline we have read from Hebrews is designed to be encouraging. We are surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses. We have supporters. We need not be weighed down by any anxiety or inadequacy, but be

carried along. And the outcome of all this is not is people who are even more anxious, desperately keeping rules and observing boundaries. The outcome is peace: the removal of bitterness and trouble. That's the sort of discipline we're invited to engage in; it's the sort of discipline to sign up to with eagerness.

Amen.