

20th Sunday after Trinity 2018 (Evensong)

Joshua 5: 13 – 6: 20; Matthew 11: 20 – end

I suspect that after five years at the Priory, most regular worshippers will have worked out that how committed I am to the Anglican Choral Tradition. But it's on evenings like this evening, when we have a lesson taken from a passage like Joshua 5 & 6, that you just wish that instead of having Mendelssohn we could have a rousing Negro spiritual instead. We could have the boys prancing round blowing plastic trumpets while all the adults sing "Joshua fit the battle of Jericho." I have sung some wonderful settings of it over the years, actually, but I have to say always in concerts rather than liturgically. I remember one that had a fantastically climactic ending that concluded with the silliest descending glissando. [*Mimics*]

It's all jolly, silly stuff and rather fun to remember. But that rather gives the lie to the anguish and suffering out of which the spirituals were born. They

are the embittered cry of longing of people held captive as slaves; of people who live under the ultimate disability and powerlessness of not being recognised as people at all, but rather being herded and traded and flogged and worked as mere possessions of someone else.

Negro slaves often felt that the salvation they received through their faith in Jesus Christ was expressed, not so much in stories about the life of Jesus himself, as in the stories about the people of Israel being led out of their own slavery into the Promised Land. Negro slaves sang out of the depths of their despair but with a conviction that one day all the walls that barred their path to freedom would come tumbling down. (I think I once sang a setting where the word 'tumbling' ricocheted down through the parts like stones ricocheting into each other as the wall fell: tumbling, tumbling, tumbling, tumbling, tumbling, tumbling down.)

The faith of those Negro people, labouring under the disability and powerlessness of their slavery, speaks and ministers to us today with a clarity that coherently captures what Christianity is all about. We've sung about it this evening, not in a Negro Spiritual but in a setting by Stanford in C: it's all about God showing strength with his arm, scattering the proud in the imagination of their hearts, putting down the mighty from their seat, exalting the humble and meek, filling the hungry with good things and sending the rich away with nothing – except I suspect that Sunday by Sunday, in the privilege of the beautifully crafted worship of the Priory, the clarity is lost and the radical nature of the message is robbed of its coherence.

There's no point in beating ourselves up because we are privileged. But we do need to recognise and acknowledge that we are enormously privileged to worship with a world class organ and the best choir in the diocese outside York Minster and architecture and heritage and the sort of entitlement to which all those

things are the trappings. And we need to acknowledge it because all those things place us in the position of the 'wise and the intelligent' of which Jesus speaks in our lesson from Matthew's Gospel this evening. One scholar has said "Intelligence and wisdom are often names for the power and violence employed to sustain our illusions of superiority."¹

Jesus has harsh words to say to those who hold the privilege of the wise and the intelligent. Another scholar has said that his woes to the cities of Galilee, which James read to us this evening, are like "a shock of cold water thrown over the narrative."² They shock us out of our comfy, cuddly idea of Jesus being nothing but love.

And Jesus has those harsh words for the privileged because they – or we, if the cap fits – don't get it as easily and as clearly as people who labour under

¹ Hauerwas, S [2015] "Matthew" in Brazos Theological Commentary on the Bible series

² Byrne, B [2004] Lifting the Burden: Reading Matthew's Gospel . . . "

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disability and powerlessness. In Matthew's Gospel the example of disability and powerlessness Jesus cites is youth: "I thank you, heavenly Father . . . because you have . . . revealed [these things] to infants" he says. For the Negroes of the Deep South it was the disability and powerlessness of slavery. It might be the disability and powerlessness of physical handicap. It might be the disability and powerlessness of poverty – you name it.

The point is the paradox that the absence of disability – or the presence of privilege – is actually an obstacle to receiving the good news of Jesus Christ. And as I have said, we don't need to beat ourselves up about it; we don't need to repent of it: we just need to admit it and face up to the fact that it places us under a burden.

That burden is the burden of the judgment of Jesus. "Woe to you" privileged people says Jesus. But the judgment of Jesus is not a threat of punishment: it is an invitation to allow Jesus to help us carry that

burden. The "shock of cold water" is followed by what lovers of the Book of Common Prayer know as the "comfortable words" of Jesus: Come unto me all that travail and are heavy laden, and I will refresh you.

If we can have the humility and the clarity of insight to do that, then all the artifice and illusion that prevent us from knowing Jesus with the intensity of those who wrote the Negro Spirituals will come tumbling down; and we will be able to count the blessings of our privilege and our souls will magnify the Lord.

Amen.