

Ninth Sunday after Trinity 2021 (1.08.2021)

Ephesians 4: 1 – 16; John 6: 24 – 35

Well, how marvellous it is to be six feet above contradiction again! For eighteen months I've been down there, with the hoi poloi, but now I'm once again elevated to my rightful place of distinction! . . . Except I'm faced with a Gospel reading which shows that Jesus will have none of that sort of carry on.

This morning's Gospel reading has Jesus going off in a boat to *the other side* of Sea of Galilee, the territory known as Galilee of the Gentiles, where the population was predominately non-Jewish. I mean, don't get me wrong, towns like Capernaum on the Gentile side of the lake, did have Jewish populations and a Synagogue, but things were a bit ambiguous: it wasn't proper, respectable Jewish Society. Jesus didn't stand on his dignity: he kept bad company.

Now, let's just be clear about this, because I don't want to take it too far and make more out of it than I legitimately can. Jesus exercised his ministry in the manner of a good Jewish Rabbi. We're often told that he sat down and began to speak. When the Bible tells us that Jesus sat down, it's not just a bit of superfluous, unnecessary detail about his bodily posture. When the bible tell us he sat down, the words are loaded with code. They're designed to make us say, aha, prick up our ears, put on our thinking caps and prepare our minds for some serious chunk of teaching.

When the Bible tells us that Jesus sat down, it is telling us that he assumed the authority of the traditional teaching mode of a Rabbi. It's how Rabbis taught, and still do. If you go to Jerusalem and you go to the Western Wall of the Temple Mount to pray – well, you can't if you're not a man – but if you can pray at the Western Wall, you can go along a sort of corridor under I guess part of the Temple Mount and there are

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alcoves all along it – it's like an open-plan series of classrooms – and Rabbis sit in quite big seats with crowds of people sitting around them on the floor; sitting at their feet, hanging on to every word of their wisdom.

This is how Jesus taught. It's completely different, but it has the same symbolism as us saying somebody climbed up into the pulpit and began to preach. So let's be clear: Jesus exercised authority and commanded respect. And he assumed the trappings of authority in order to command respect.

But – and this is the important point – Jesus never stood on his dignity. It's always been understood, from the very earliest times, that that's the point of God becoming incarnate, of God's own self being born and living a human life. In Paul's letter to the Philippians there's a passage about Jesus not clinging to equality with God, but assuming the role of a slave.

Now Philippians is one of the earliest documents in the New Testament. It's far earlier, perhaps decades earlier, than the Gospels. But scholars think that Paul didn't write this passage. They think he was quoting a Christian hymn that was already in circulation. If you go home and look up Philippians chapter 2, in most versions the passage I'm talking about is indented to show it's a quote or sometimes even in inverted commas. But the original Greek didn't have any such devices, so scholars can only speculate. But if it was already in circulation before Paul was writing, it must be from *the* very earliest days of Christian worship.

Christ Jesus . . . 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. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death – even death on a cross.

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So, where do you go looking for Jesus? Well, in the Gospel story today, the crowds couldn't find him in the place where he'd sat down to feed the five thousand – note, he sat down to do that; they couldn't find him in the place of formal teaching. They had to go looking for him. They had to get into boats and set out across the Sea of Galilee. They had to end up in a neighbourhood they may well have felt uncomfortable about. In other stories, they were shocked to find him eating with prostitutes or dodgy tax collectors. And in the story everyone knows, the story of his birth, the Wise Men got it wrong when they went looking for him in a royal palace in the capital city. They had to be redirected to a grotty cow shed.

Finding where Jesus is involves us rolling up our sleeves and getting our hands dirty. So if anyone wants to look for him, they'd better get down from their soap box and say . . .

Amen.