

## Epiphany 6: Coming Down to Earth

I am half-way through reading the 2<sup>nd</sup> of the books by Diana Butler Bass that I received as Christmas presents.

A month ago, I referred in my sermon to the first, entitled 'Christianity After Religion'. You will find an article on what I made of Diana's message in this month's 'In Touch' magazine. In a nutshell, it was this: the churches must not only change tactics but 'slim' their theology if they are not to be left on the sidelines as society gets caught up in a spiritual revolution.

That second book is entitled 'Grounded' is an analysis of her own faith journey rather than church praxis but follows a similar trajectory. One of her phrases neatly summarises her stance: Christianity should be a 'Horizontal' rather than a 'Vertical' faith. It so happens that the OT and Epistle appointed for today are good examples of 'Vertical faith': the Gospel can be too, if you allow it to be dragged by the other two in that direction but the traction should always come from the teachings of Jesus, and it arguably presents the case for a 'Horizontal Faith'.

You should have copies of all three readings to hand although we will only be reading the Gospel aloud. The OT reading expresses a vertical faith, as in the last (10<sup>th</sup>) verse from Jer. 17. *"I the Lord test the mind and search the heart, to give to all according to their ways, according to the fruit of their doings."* Here we have the Lord involved in 'top/down' surveillance and using a 'carrot & stick' strategy, intervening to reward good behavior.

This is 'Vertical faith'

Likewise, in the Epistle from Cor 15, we have the ultimate reward for the vertically faithful. Paul says *'If for this life only we have hoped in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied'*.

Our gaze is directed forward in time and upward to heaven "Vertical Faith" again.

By contrast, Luke's Gospel brings us down to earth from the start. Where Matthew gathers the same teachings Jesus' together, they are delivered from a height in what is called the 'Sermon on the Mount'. In Luke "Jesus came down with them to a level place".

Jesus brought the disciples down to rub shoulders with a crowd of sick and troubled people, who all wanted his healing touch: few probably managed to get close enough. 'Yet power came out of him and ALL were healed'.

Many had come with confidence that healing was in their midst through the presence of Jesus and it passed from him to them.

'Horizontal Faith' if ever there was!

And what a hectic day it must have been!!

Jesus and his followers would all have needed time to recover and reflect on what had happened: this seems to have happened, for we read

*'Then he looked up at his disciples and said----:'*

You can't reach many in a crowd sitting down! Jesus is presumably now seated in a ring of awestruck disciples when he then says to his followers

*'Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God.*

*'Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you will be filled.*

*'Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh.*

What exactly are his promises and expectations?

*'Blessed are you who are poor, for yours **is** the kingdom of God.*

The disciples had voluntarily become poor: they had left behind all their possessions and security to become spiritually enriched: they had become children of the kingdom.

The itinerant band of teachers and healers would have regularly known hunger but can always expect to find sufficient for body as well as mind.

There would be times when they cried, even with hunger, when prospects looked bleak but this would only intensify the joy when times improved.

As Kahlil Gibran once said 'Your joy is your sorrow unmasked'

But how could he be so sure and what would enable such transformation?

He could see that his willingness to make sacrifices for others was drawing the disciples along a similar path. Provided they continued on that path, and persuaded others to do likewise, the hungry would be fed and there would be pockets of joy wherever they tended the poor, hungry, sick and depressed.

*'Rejoice on that day and leap for joy',*

Again the fruits of Horizontal Faith are seen here on earth.

Finally, Jesus moves on to apparently talk about the hereafter

'for surely your reward is great in heaven'

but note the tense - 'IS' - great in heaven: reward is accruing while good things are being done, here on earth.

DBB makes an interesting point about the location of heaven in 'Grounded'. In Hebrew, the word for 'heaven' is the same as that for 'sky'. In common parlance, the two are synonymous when we describe a downpour as 'the heavens opening'. The heavens are where God has traditionally been located i.e. God was skybound.

But where does sky begin and end: does it end at the edge of atmosphere, stratosphere, as far as the most powerful telescopes can see or beyond technical sight? Where it begins is easier to define though not immediately obvious: under our feet and at horizons, where earth meets sky. From the very moment of creation, God has hovered over the earth, close enough to move waves, according to Genesis.

Church architecture has symbolised a vertical faith and tried to keep God under wraps. Church liturgy and its custodians, the episcopate, in promoting Jesus as God in human flesh, brings God down to earth but mostly fixing our gaze in the rear-view mirror: the risk is that the Creative spirit becomes fossilized.

A Horizontal Faith locates and lauds the Creator's spirit as the lifeblood of the world around us, beyond the doorsteps of our churches. Today's Gospel confirms that the creator's spirit is accessible to all who are prepared to lay down their lives for the earth's inhabitants.