

Sermon 24th Jan 2020 “Do whatever He tells you”

This is the transcript of a radio conversation from 1995 between an American Naval ship and the Canadian authorities, off the Canadian coast. It was released to the public by the Chief of Naval Operations. Americans: Please divert your course 15 degrees to the North to avoid a Collision.

Canadians: Recommend you divert YOUR course 15 degrees to the South to avoid a collision.

Americans: This is the Captain of a US Navy ship. I say again, divert YOUR course.

Canadians: No. I say again - you divert YOUR course.

Americans: This is the aircraft carrier USS Lincoln, the second largest ship in the United States' Atlantic fleet. We are accompanied by three destroyers, three cruisers and numerous support vessels. I demand that YOU change your course 15 degrees north, that's one five degrees north, or countermeasures will be undertaken to ensure the safety of this ship.

Canadians: This is a lighthouse. Your call.

“Do whatever He tells you”. A dilemma for our human nature, perhaps, when we don't like something we're being told, and especially if we have to change our direction, or change our way of doing things when we may not want to, or we think we know better! A dilemma can happen for us when we don't know what it is that God wants us to do. From today's gospel, we hear the words of Jesus's mother saying to the servants at the wedding party “do whatever He tells you”: well - that was ok for them – Jesus was right there in front of them, and told them clearly what to do. The problem for us sometimes comes when we can't easily discern what it is that Jesus might be asking of us. How do we know? How can we tell? Does it matter if we don't hear a clear voice?

Most of us I guess would say that we don't hear Jesus' voice speaking clearly to us – although sometimes that does of course happen: I hear people sometimes saying that they think God has spoken and I can vouch for that in my own life – but for me it has been very rare to hear directly and with any sense of clarity.

We don't generally tend to hear God's – or Jesus' voice, whichever way you prefer to think of this - speaking often and clearly to us. What I hear people more usually describing is how God has spoken through something – an event or occurrence - or perhaps through someone else.

How then, do we know what to do in our lives? As Christians, we so often say that we follow Jesus and do our best to obey him and do as He requires of us – as his servants. How do we know that we're living our lives in the way that Jesus would want us to? How do we discern his voice today?

In the absence of hearing a clear voice telling us what to do, the examples of Jesus through his actions and his behaviours that are apparent in today's gospel give us some clues for our own discernment in our own lives – for our actions and our behaviours and our decisions. Let's lift a few things out of the passage:

Jesus listens to those around him and he observes what's happening / He acts on the problem in hand / He acts with generosity and with kindness / He acts hospitably, by transforming the water into wine – copious quantities of wine it seems - and thereby, He restores joy to the situation ('without wine there is no joy', so the ancient Jewish saying goes – and I know that some of my colleagues on the ministry team would wholeheartedly agree with that saying, especially if it's a good quality red....)

These actions and behaviours of Jesus are the rather **obvious things** that we can gather from this short story in John's gospel, and we can think well, yes, we can do some of those things too, we can do what he did - we can emulate those behaviours and actions and fashion our lives on Jesus: Aside of turning water into wine, which unfortunately we can't do, we can do those other things: listening, observing, offering hospitality, bring generous, being kind, giving time and attention to others, and helping to increase their enjoyment of things.

One of the basic patterns of our Christian calling – whatever that calling might look like - is to do as Jesus did, to mirror our behaviour on his, and if we don't or can't hear him speak clearly to us, then

sometimes all we can do is to do as He did – to mirror his examples. And that's all good!

But I think we can dig a little deeper and find out something more about another implication **for us** both from this story of the wedding in John's gospel and also by looking back at our Old Testament story which we heard earlier, from Genesis. At first glance, the brief Genesis reading is a simple encounter between two people, and we could choose if we wished to read it as we've just done with our gospel, just picking out what's most obvious.

Often we see echoes of ancient scripture in new testament passages, and at times of course some direct quotation, but here I think the opposite of that may be true – instead of an echo in the new testament passage, I think we have more of a foreshadowing in the OT. And here's how:

In Genesis 14 the mysterious Priest King Melchizedek of Salem (– possibly later associated with Jerusalem, the eternal city) - meets Abram. We might recall (although we need to look to the Letter to the Hebrews to find this) that this mystical figure Melchizedek was said to be without earthly Father or Mother, without genealogy, and with no beginning or end to his life. And so - we can make a connection between the eternal Melchizedek and Jesus as eternal Priest and with neither having a conventional genealogy. Hold on to that for a moment.

What happens in the Genesis narrative is that Abram has succeeded in battle and the people then gather together. Melchizedek the Priest joins them and brings out bread and wine. A

prayer of thanks is said. He offers Abram a Blessing and in return Abram tithes to him a 10th of the loot from the battle.

What emerges from this event is, I think, of some Eucharistic significance: the gathering of the people together, the prayers of thanks for a battle won, the prayer of blessing of God, the bringing out of bread and wine, the offering of possessions and the sharing of them, the sharing of time and hospitality, and the blessing of Abram. I don't know about you, but I find this really extraordinary. Here surely is a kind of Eucharistic shaped ceremony, with some of the key elements that we would recognise today, but this happened 1000's of years before the earliest described Eucharists of the Christian Church and of course pre-dated, by a long way, the Last Supper.

I think we could spend a long time thinking about this, but sadly we don't have time right now, so I'll leave you to contemplate this in your own time. Suffice to say, that it seems to me that this event in Genesis foreshadowed the Eucharist in an extraordinary way: Was Melchizedek merely a King / Priest in Salem at that time, or was what Abram experienced actually a mystical encounter with Jesus? If you believe as I do, that Jesus was co-existent with the Father before time began, then this transitory appearance of Jesus – in the form of Melchizedek - becomes a possibility. Was this encounter a revelation of Jesus to Abram and in fact the very beginnings of what was to come in the earthly world – the self - giving hospitality and generosity of Jesus as bread and wine? If we can set aside our human reasoning of time and eternity then this is possible.

Let's now very briefly compare what I think occurred in that Genesis account with the wedding reception at Cana from John's Gospel. And I think we see a very similar thing: the gathering of the people together in one place in a celebration, no doubt the bringing out of food for the wedding feast, the miraculous appearing and offering of wine, thankfulness, joy and many blessings.

The water into wine episode in John is a sign, we're told by the writer of the gospel, not merely a miracle. A sign points towards something. This particular sign though points us in two directions: It points us towards the wine that is Jesus which he offers as his blood in the Last Supper, which we read in the Synoptics and onwards to the wine of the Eucharist of the Church, where those same ancient Eucharistic words of Jesus are repeated and repeated: 'this my blood, given for you'. And the sign I think points us backwards as a reminder of the possible Eucharistic encounter of Genesis between Abram and the eternal mystical Melchizedek.

At the Last Supper the words which were spoken were those all-important words 'do this in Remembrance of me'. *'Do this in remembrance of me'*.

Here is a clear directive then for any of us who might struggle to hear God's clear voice – we're to do likewise, to do as He taught us, to do those words he said: 'do this in remembrance of me'. This is what Jesus tells us all to do - it's there, right there, in scripture and handed down through the ages, decade upon decade, century upon century, for all time. These are the really important words we need to hear.

It's also incumbent on us, as it was for the hosts of the wedding at Cana, to invite others in to the Feast of Remembering, to taste the best wine which leads to fullness of life, to taste the kingdom of God, to come and see what Christian faith is all about. It's incumbent on us to keep on doing likewise, to do as he told us, to be obedient to the voice of Jesus as we find it in the scriptures: this is our call, no matter whether you hear the voice of Jesus / God speaking directly to you or not.: Do this in remembrance of me We invite others in, to come and see for themselves, to invite them to participate in the feast of all feasts, the eternal feast of heaven, for this is the place, I believe, where we come closest to Jesus. Amen.