

Chichester Cathedral
James the Apostle (Mattins) 25 July 2010

It is said that scientists are better at interesting sound bites than theologians. From the former you have the ‘big bang’ and the ‘selfish gene’, and from the latter ‘realised eschatology’ and the ‘hermeneutical circle’. On the other hand, it was biblical scholars who came up with the ‘pearls on a string’ analogy. In the first half of the last century, Dibelius and Bultmann argued that the material in the Gospels had originally been disconnected, individual stories passed on by word of mouth. They had then been put together, a little haphazardly, into a written narrative, like ‘pearls on a string.’

By the time I got to theological college Morna Hooker, Lady Margaret Professor of Divinity at Cambridge, had this to say: ‘It will not, I hope, be regarded as a sexist remark if I suggest that only a man could have used the phrase “like pearls on a string” to suggest a haphazard arrangement... Any woman would have spotted the flaw in the analogy: pearls need to be carefully selected and graded. And gradually it has dawned on New Testament scholars that this is what the evangelists... have done with their material.’

Let’s test this thesis on today’s passage from Luke. It contains three ‘pearls’: one about true greatness, another about casting out demons, and yet another about Jesus setting his face to go to Jerusalem, and rebuking James and John along the way. In my bible these three are separated into distinct paragraphs, each with a different heading. So have they been carefully selected and graded to sit alongside one another, or not? Can we see the connections, or are they disconnected nuggets which we only get to hear this morning because the third section happens to mention James the Apostle, whose feast day it is?

Well, as soon as you take the trouble to look, the truth of Morna Hooker’s words are apparent. The three pearls are fittingly placed together, and the connections can be drawn out in various ways. For the purposes of this sermon, I’m going to focus on the phrase ‘in my name’ which appears in pearl one and pearl two, and suggest that the major theme of all three is true and false discipleship.

Few Christians nowadays would explicitly argue, as the disciples apparently did, about who was the greatest. We know this is just not the done thing, but that doesn’t mean the desire to be number one, top dog, has disappeared; it may simply have gone underground. Who knows what exactly Jesus had in mind when he took a young child and said ‘Whoever welcomes this child *in my name* welcomes me.’ Certainly the innocence of children can be overplayed, but getting one over your rivals through long term scheming and manipulation is very much an adult skill.

Jesus wants his disciples to welcome *in his name*, and (despite the protests) allows a man casting out demons *in his name*, to carry on doing so. It may be hard for us to

realise the full significance of this repeated phrase, in an age when even amongst Christians the third commandment, not to take the name of the Lord in vain, has diminished power.

And yet it's clear that in the three great religious faiths stemming from Abraham, the name of God is the cause for profound reverence. In the Old Testament, God's proper name cannot even be uttered. This is because God's name stands for all that God is. And so when in the New Testament, Paul writes to the Philippians: 'At the name of Jesus every knee shall bow' this is because the name stands for all that *Jesus* is. So it was that for many centuries the name of Jesus was never mentioned by the faithful without a bow, if not of the knee, then at least of the head. Some still do so today during the saying of the Creed.

All of this suggests awe, even fear; and indeed when the holy names of our religion are used each day as expletives, we may well feel that a bit more fear of God is in order. But fear is not the Gospel's last word about God; and respecting God's holy name is not the whole story of our relationship with him. Last weeks collect had it exactly right: 'graft in our hearts the *love* of your name'. That is the note struck by the Gospel: it is a love affair with God to which we are invited, and we take his name upon our lips, not as servants in awe of their Lord so much as lovers entranced with their beloved.

Think of Charles Wesley's hymn: 'Thy nature, gracious Lord, impart, Come quickly from above; Write thy new name upon my heart, Thy new best name of love.'

In our three 'pearls on a string' today, the apostles are wondering about achieving greatness, trying to stop someone who is outside their number from doing God's work, and wanting to call down fire on their opponents (presumably in imitation of Elijah). This is all happening at a great hinge in the gospel, as Jesus turns his face to Jerusalem, accepting that his last days are near, and the suffering that is to come. James and his fellow Apostles will be tested and found wanting, as the sacrificial love animating every fibre of their Lord and Master leads him to the cross.

In this crucible they will learn just who Jesus is, and what he is about; and what it really means to be a disciple doing things 'in his name'. Here they will learn what it means to found a new community, Christ's church, whose reason for existence is to live 'in his name.'

I leave my final sound bite not to the scientists, nor to the scholars, but to the hymn writer John Newton: 'Dear name! [he wrote] the rock on which I build, My shield and hiding-place, My never-failing treasury filled With boundless stores of grace.'
AMEN