

Mattins July 4th 2010 “Just as I am”

Sermons are not the only form of teaching and reflection employed in worship. Since the fourth century hymns have also been used not only to praise God but to give congregations what John Wesley called “practical divinity”. So this morning I want to say something about the hymn we shall sing a bit later and if it helps to have it open in front of you it is number 294.

The writer of this hymn was one Charlotte Elliot who grew up happily as part of a clergy family, her father being Vicar of Clapham. But, in 1821, at the age of 32, all that changed when she suddenly contracted an illness that left her permanently disabled. Not long after this her father invited an evangelist to come and work in the parish and as soon as this evangelist met Charlotte he saw that the illness had left inner wounds as well as outward disability. His approach to Charlotte was very direct. “Why have you not turned to Christ and found his peace in your suffering”, he said. She responded by saying: “I want to turn to the Lord but I don’t know how.” “Come to him just as you are”, said the evangelist. And so that is what she did and she found some inner peace. Following this episode she also started to write hymns and life gradually regained some stability. Twelve

years later, though, she went to stay with her brother, who was also a priest, in Brighton. Her brother was in the process of starting a school in the parish and at the time of Charlotte's visit was holding a fete to raise the necessary funds. Lots of preparations were made but when it came to the day of the fete Charlotte was too unwell to go. Left on her own she was overwhelmed with depression and feelings that she was both useless and helpless. Then the words of the evangelist came back to her: "Come to him just as you are". That afternoon those words spoke to her afresh and she felt inspired to sit and write today's hymn: "Just as I am".

The basis of the hymn is that it is no good pretending with God or presenting to him what we think is an acceptable façade. We have to be honest and come to him just as we are. Apart from anything else God knows us better than we know ourselves – "you are familiar with all my ways", says the Psalmist, so it's pointless to bluff. And Charlotte Elliot highlights particular areas of life where we need to be honest with God. "Just as I am *without one plea*". We shouldn't make excuses for our failures or blame others. We shouldn't try to justify ourselves before God either through our words or by our actions. We are to come before God simply as we are acknowledging our need. Verse 2 gives us another example.

“Just as I am though tossed about with many a conflict, many a doubt”. If we are in turmoil or full of doubt then let’s be honest about our inner state. And this honesty is essential because God cannot help an imaginary self or a fantasy personality. He can only relate to us as we present our real selves to him in prayer. Then we open ourselves up to the riches of his grace and the healing of the mind as verse 3 puts it.

But, the other really important thing in this hymn is that it tells us why such healing and grace are possible. The line that runs throughout the hymn is: “O Lamb of God I come”. It’s a phrase that echoes the words of John the Baptist about Jesus that we heard earlier: “Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world”. In the scriptures the Lamb is often linked to sacrifice and so it is here. Jesus is the Lamb who sacrifices himself for the life of the world. And the efficacy of this sacrifice is referred to in verse 5: “Thy love unknown has broken every barrier down”. Whether we come before God full of conflicts and doubts; or weighed down with failure and anxiety; or lukewarm and indifferent the Lamb of God can break down those barriers that separate us from God. So this hymn is full of hope. It reminds me of St. Paul’s

wonderful words: “nothing can separate us from the love of Christ”.

Time allows us only a cursory look at this marvellous hymn. But, I want to end with a reflection made on the hymn by Charlotte Elliot’s brother. You will remember that he was a priest in Brighton and by all accounts was a very active and vigorous parish priest. Yet later in life he said that his sister’s hymn had produced more fruit than the whole of his long, active ministry.

It’s very easy in this hyperactive culture to feel that God also demands intense activity from us. But, the example of Charlotte Elliot is that whether we are disabled and housebound; tired or full of years; or limited by other circumstances we can still be a follower of Christ who bears much fruit. It is the principle of reversal we see so often in the Gospels. It is those who seem poor in spirit, weak or vulnerable who so often prove to be the best agents of the kingdom. And the reason is that if we are limited in what we can do then we have to depend on his grace and strength. In our weakness God is strong. So whether we have come here this morning feeling burdened, bored or blessed let us come before the Lord just as we are as we sing hymn number 294.