

**Chichester Cathedral**  
**Third Sunday of Advent, 11.00am Eucharist, 11 December 2011**

In 1896, Charles Sheldon, a minister in Kansas, published a best-selling book entitled *In His Steps*. Its subtitle would become famous, notorious even – *What Would Jesus Do? In His Steps – what would Jesus do?* is more like a novel than a theological work, every chapter having a cliffhanger ending. The story begins in a prosperous church where the minister has preached a stirring sermon on following Christ, and the choir has sung movingly on the same theme. An unkempt young man then comes forward and addresses the congregation, telling a long tale of misfortune and failed attempts to find help. He says that most Church people seem well off and comfortable compared to the poverty of many in their city. ‘What would Jesus do?’ he asks, and shortly afterwards collapses.

The following Sunday a packed congregation is told that during the week the young man has died in the minister’s house. Haunted by his last words, the minister challenges his people ‘to do what Jesus would do’ in whatever ways they can. He asks for volunteers who will pledge ‘not to do anything without first asking the question, “What would Jesus do?” And after asking that question, each one will follow Jesus as exactly as he knows how, no matter what the result may be.’ *In His Steps* goes on to tell of the transformed lives that follow this challenge.

So what kind of Christian discipleship does Charles Sheldon advocate? His book encourages both personal and social transformation. Sheldon believes in personal responsibility, but also in the need for prophetic politics. A good example is his attitude to alcoholism, a major social problem of his time (just as the ‘booze culture’ is in ours). He knew alcoholism was partly to do with character and willpower, but realized levels of poverty and the way drink was marketed and sold were also factors. But what *would* Jesus do about this? Sheldon’s solution was Prohibition (a total ban on alcohol) a policy attempted in America, but discredited and considered a failure.

This example shows it’s easier to ask ‘What would Jesus do?’ than to be sure of the response. As the Archbishop of Canterbury has pointed out this week, it’s a perfectly good question, but it shouldn’t be treated as a shortcut going straight to the right answer; or worse, a right answer conveniently backing up your own viewpoint. A key trigger for his reflection is the banner in the protest camp outside St Paul’s, which does indeed show forth the subtitle of Sheldon’s book - What *would* Jesus do?

Today’s gospel helps us see why it’s a difficult question. John the Baptist tells his questioners, ‘Among you stands one whom you do not know.’ It’s presumptuous of anyone to claim they understand Jesus well enough to be certain what he *would* do. The *difficulty* of knowing Jesus is an important theme in John’s gospel. Nicodemus and

the Samaritan woman hear his words but struggle to grasp their meaning. The high priest can only see a threat to the status quo. Even the disciples consistently misunderstand him. As Archbishop Rowan points out, the Jesus we meet in the Bible is somebody who constantly asks awkward questions, especially to religious people, moral people and rich people. Somebody who challenges especially these to very roots of their being.

Jesus is scathing about the Pharisee, full of piety and morality, and yet so self righteous he gives thanks for not being as fallible as other people are. He is scathing about those so seduced by wealth they forget their duty to God and neighbour. And he is scathing to his disciples when they fail to grasp what he is about. Why should we imagine he would be any less robust with protesters, financiers and church people today?

The most truthful answer to 'what would Jesus do?' is probably, 'I'm not sure.' It *is* a fair question, but it's definitely not a shortcut: seriously seeking to answer it will take time; we need to get to *know* Jesus, before we can have a hope of knowing what he might *do*.

Perhaps the readings set for this Sunday can help us. For a start, Jesus saw his ministry explicitly in terms of this morning's passage from Isaiah, about bringing good news to the oppressed, and liberty to captives. He selected this very text to read aloud in the synagogue, and told his astounded hearers it was being fulfilled right in front of them, right now. It's a wonderful passage, full of hope and rejoicing, anticipating a massive reversal of fortune. It originally referred to the ruins of Jerusalem, to be rebuilt by the exiles returning from Babylon, but on the lips of Jesus it becomes a message of hope for all times and places, perhaps especially those places needing rebuilding today, whether bombed out streets in Baghdad, or parts of London or Liverpool scarred by rioting earlier this year.

What of our second reading from 1 Thessalonians? There we learn not so much what Jesus might do, but what he wants his followers to do. 'Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances.'. 'Rejoice *always*'?, someone might retort – with the world in the state it's in? But this kind of rejoicing is not a rose tinted, bury your head in the sand optimism. It's not a 'let's forget all in our troubles' bit of Christmas escapism. Rather it rests in the conviction that God may just have given us what we need to hold fast to what is good in both prosperity and adversity.

According to 1 Thessalonians, God in Christ will 'sanctify' us; that is, make us holy. And I mean 'us'. The 'you' and the 'your' are plural – in fact every verb in the passage is plural. Being part of a community that is being shaped by Christ, that is growing in prayer and holiness, is key to 'rejoicing always'. Being part of a community that breaks bread together is key to knowing Christ, and therefore knowing what he might do.

Sheldon's book *In His Steps* captures something of the power of the gospel for a whole community. Into a comfortable church comes an unsettling figure who disturbs, challenges, and shows them the true state of their discipleship. He then dies. Everything is turned upside down as a result. In this way the unkempt young man who addresses the congregation has something of Christ about him.

The thing that really strikes me about Jesus Christ himself, is that he created a kind of gracious space around him: not a cosy space, but a compelling space. Questioning and challenge, and healing and transformation, were all to be found in his presence. For all that he could be uncomfortable at times, the underlying note in his presence was one of rejoicing - because everything he did was underpinned by a committed compassion, an unshakeable love.

We may not be able to say exactly what Jesus would do in every situation facing us today, but we can know for sure that he would still be creating that gracious space around him, and whatever he did would be characterised by the same committed compassion.

For this Cathedral and its community, therefore, the implications are clear: we should be about the provision of gracious space, welcoming to all, and we should be about committed compassion. This does *not* mean being cosy and unchallenging! Sheldon's book, remember is all about personal and social transformation, and prophetic politics, as a community wrestles with what it means to walk *In His Steps* today.

In this Advent season, perhaps the best preparation we can make for the coming of Christ, is to stop imagining that we understand him already, and allow ourselves to be challenged right to the roots of our being. Knowing we can allow this to happen because we are in the hands of committed, unshakeable love. Christ may have been scathing to the self-righteous, but to those who knew their need of God he proclaims the year of the Lord's favour, and says 'Rejoice always.' God has given us what we need to hold fast to what is good, whether in prosperity or adversity. AMEN