



**Proper 10, Year C – June 6, 2010**

Galatians 1.11-24

**A Homily preached by the Venerable M. Ansley Tucker**

The date is Wednesday, May 24, 1738. The place is a small room in the back streets of London. John Wesley, a 35 year old Anglican priest, has come to the meeting out of duty, not desire. He records the experience in his diary:

*"In the evening I went very unwillingly to a society in Aldersgate Street, where one was reading Luther's preface to the Epistle to the Romans. About a quarter before nine, while he was describing the change which God works in the heart through faith in Christ, I felt my heart strangely warmed. I felt I did trust in Christ, Christ alone for my salvation; and an assurance was given me that he had taken away my sins, even mine, and saved me from the law of sin and death."*

Although Wesley is not known to have spoken of this event again, it clearly marked a turning point in his religious experience and conviction. He was already feeling somewhat at odds with the rather dry and cerebral Anglicanism with which he grew up. Here, in one brief moment, were the seeds of what would become two hallmarks of his teaching and preaching until his death in 1791. First, that God is not to be sought out or discovered by us, but rather comes to us first: God is always one step ahead of us, tilling the soil of our hearts to receive him. (For those who like labels, this is the doctrine of "prevenient grace.") And second, that faith is not a matter of intellect or belief only, but also of the heart, and of "felt" experience. In other words, it was legitimate for people to expect to "feel" something when they prayed, to actually "experience" the presence of the Holy Spirit. Wesley found his audience not in the stuffy churches of England, but in the open fields and byways, where people longed for a gospel that touched them where they were.

Enter the Bishop of Bristol, the famously intellectual Joseph Butler. Bishop Butler was in many ways a man of his time, and he held no truck with these so-called "enthusiasts". This is not surprising. It was the Age of Reason, and the Church, in order to be taken seriously by the thinkers of the day, needed to show itself profoundly "rational" in its approach to the gospel and religious experience. Circuit riders like John Wesley were an embarrassment.

This brings us to one of the most famous interchanges in Anglican history. The story is told of Bishop Butler happening upon Wesley preaching to a gathering of coalminers in an open field. Butler, with full episcopal dignity, rebuked Wesley, saying, "Sir, the pretending to extraordinary revelations and gifts of the Holy Ghost is a horrid thing, a very horrid thing."

Butler is not alone in this assessment. Over the centuries we have been consistently dubious about claims of direct revelations from God. The surest way for a candidate for ordination to guarantee that he or she will *not* be ordained is to claim that God "told" him or her to be a priest. Not least, this is because so much psychopathology manifests itself as religious delusion. My very first psychiatric patient as student nurse introduced himself to me as "John Arthur Brown, Son of God." John was a sweet man, really, fairly harmless – so long as "his" God remained harmless. But what about Jim Jones, David Koresh, or the Order of the Solar Templar in Quebec. We are wisely distrustful of claims to "extraordinary revelations."

But it is also because the cocky self-assurance of anyone who claims to have a direct line to the mind of God is deeply antithetical to the kind of humility we expect of the "godly." How can you even have a conversation with someone who cites the Almighty as their authority? Tolerance, and a mutual seeking after the truth, go right out the window. This is the kind of attitude by which we have seen, too often, Christians "un-churching" each other.

There is also a rather less noble motive for distrusting "extraordinary revelations:" for the truth is, more often than not, such "communications" run counter to the *status quo*. To wit, John Wesley: the "strange warming of his heart" led him to teach a Christianity which was at odds with the received tradition of the time. Many is the time that the Church has sacrificed an "outrider" at the altar of institutional stability. Jesus would be a case on point. As would Thomas More. Or John Wycliffe. Or, for that matter, any parish priest who got sacked for moving people too far too fast in a direction they didn't want to go. Institutions do not take kindly to upheaval and change.

I wonder if you have made the connection between the experience of John Wesley and St Paul's letter to the Galatians. Listen again:

*For I want you to know, brothers and sisters, that the gospel that was proclaimed by me is not of human origin; for I did not receive it from a human source, nor was I taught it, but I received it through a revelation of Jesus Christ... [W]hen God, who had set me apart before I was born and called me through his grace, was pleased to reveal his Son to me, so that I might proclaim him among the Gentiles, I did not confer with any human being, nor did I go up to Jerusalem to those who were already apostles before me, but I went away at once into Arabia, and afterwards I returned to Damascus.*

Oh oh! Isn't Paul making exactly the kind of claim that Bishop Butler would call "horrid, very horrid?" Yes, he is! Paul is claiming a direct revelation from God, which he has no intention of submitting to the wisdom of the Church – is there not a whiff of the very arrogance we have been discussing here? Further, this revelation represents so radical a departure from the received tradition about who's in and who's out, that its implementation will re-write forever the religious map of the world. Like Wesley, this revelation was not something Paul went looking for: rather, even from before his birth, it came looking for *him* (the doctrine of prevenience, again). And like Wesley, this realization was mediated to him through "felt" experience, rather than thought processes.

Now, from this long distance, we have come to believe and know that Paul's insight (or revelation) was godly and good, even though the resultant induction of the Gentiles into the orbit of God's love shook things up pretty nicely. (We also know from other sources, that at a certain point Paul did indeed take his message to some of the apostles, in order to seek their cooperation in his mission to the Gentiles; and we know, too, from the corroborating visions of Peter and Cornelius – which we read about just 5 weeks ago – that Paul was not alone in his conviction that God was calling the Jewish Christians to welcome Gentile believers into the fold.) But this said, Paul's revelation was certainly "out there," beyond the ken of what any "right-thinking" Jewish Christian would have thought appropriate or godly.

I take it this means that we cannot side mindlessly with Bishop Butler – "extraordinary revelations" (as he calls them) are not "horrid" *by definition*. Our received traditions (in Butler's case, a rather dry, cerebral and rational version of

Christianity) are not written in stone. The truth is that John Wesley's "enthusiasm" ultimately became a powerful force for Christian revival in England and across the world.

While the Church must obviously exercise great care in assessing claims of divine authority for new proposals, the stories of John Wesley and Paul of Tarsus show us that we reject them out of hand at our peril. What we learn from these two men is that ours is a *living* tradition, and God is apparently not beyond shaking up fustiness wherever it exists in the Church. God is not beyond putting big ideas in our heads, and hopes in our hearts, that will renew the Church for a vibrant and faithful future.