

SERMON

Rev Fergus Butler-Gallie

I shall take as the text for our sermon today a line from our second lesson which was from the Gospel according to St Luke. 'To give light to them that sit in darkness and the shadow of death and to guide our feet into the way of peace'. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of Holy Ghost. Amen.

Let me let you into a little secret, I'm not a very good driver, in fact ten years since that golden moment for most teenagers when they're allowed to start to drive and their liberty appears on the horizon I still can't, and indeed I'm languishing still on my provisional driving license.

A consequence of not being able to drive, at least currently, is that I walk everywhere, I walk to the shops, I walk to the park, I walk to visit people in hospital, or in their gardens. I walk to church, I walk even, and tell it not in gath, sometimes to the pub. And a consequence of walking everywhere is that you think an awful lot about your feet.

There's a temptation in fact to think too much about your feet, to look down at them, whilst your walking. It's not a very good idea for two reasons; firstly here in lovely wonderful Liverpool as you walk along people smile at you, they say hello, they look at you, and they expect something back. If you're looking down at your shoes, you can't return that smile, that moment of interaction. Secondly if you're looking down at your shoes you might think you know where you're going, but in fact you don't. Because the whole point about discerning where we are, which way it is we're walking, what way our journey will take, is that we need to take in that which is around us, that which is beyond us, that which is outside the confines of our eyeline, from our eyes to our shoes. In short, when we walk somewhere, we need guidance from outside.

'Guiding our feet into the way of peace', like so many of the prayer book's phrases, it has the beauty of recognisability, that echoes across the centuries, across the years into the past, the present and the future. In fact, we say it every day at Matins, I think it's a marvellous way to start the day, to ask God to guide our feet, wherever they may go, in that twenty-four hours, into the paths, into the ways of peace. But today, we heard that verse in context, in the song of Zacharias, as he celebrates the birth of John the Baptist, and with pride and with prophecy he suggests that he will be the messenger, the one who shouts forth for the one who will guide our feet into the way of peace.

John the Baptist himself was a great walker, a great user of his feet, a wonderer even, as he traversed the wildernesses of Jordan, proclaiming repentance, proclaiming redemption, and proclaiming the coming of love. But despite Zacharias' prophecy people didn't listen, they said he was a criminal, they said he had a demon, they said that he was a bad thing, a bringer not of Good News, but of bad to the extent that in the end he is murdered, killed by King Herod. People didn't open their eyes, people didn't open their ears, people didn't guide their feet into the way of peace, because that's the thing about feet, those feet, their feet, our feet, its that they don't always instinctively move themselves, direct themselves, guide themselves into the ways of peace. They don't do that into the ways of love, or righteousness or kindness, or glory either.

The Book of Common Prayer gets that, it understands it. You may remember earlier we prayed for forgiveness that we had 'erred and strayed from thy ways like lost sheep', powerful, beautiful, correct imagery. I don't know about you, but I can't count the number of times in my life when I have felt that I have erred and strayed, that I can't guide my feet into the ways that I want them to go. That's human nature, its fallen, it's failing, it's fragile, it's sinful. We are after all humans, like as a drop of water unto the sea, as our first reading from the book of Ecclesiasticus put it, 'we are not Gods'. And so, the temptation can be to think that we don't matter, that there is no consequence to the ways we walk, certainly no consequence for God, who is surely high and mighty and above all these things. The temptation is to say to ourselves, where we walk does not matter for, we walk alone, and therefore we can walk wherever we want.

The glory of the Christian faith and by extension the beauty of that rhythm found in the Book of Common Prayer is that whilst we might wonder along streets and roads we ought not to, whilst we might travel the highways and byways of anger or sadness or selfishness or fear, we do not, to quote a song very often heard in this city, 'walk alone'. When we pray those beautiful and powerful words of the prayer book we are of course walking alongside all those who prayed and knew and loved them in the many centuries since it was written and all those who will pray and know and love them in all of the centuries hence. When you prayed them today, when you joined in our worship, you were praying and walking alongside people from London, and Lincoln and Leicester and Liverpool and all across the world. And of course when we struggle with our words, struggle with our faith it's there for us as well, those well worn, well loved words cradle us and hold us and guide us into the ways of peace when we struggle with the words, struggle with the faith, it is there, faithful.

But of course, we walk alongside something, alongside someone much bigger and greater than even the combined hopes and prayers and confessions of millions of people across the ages. We walk alongside that which John the Baptist was called to announce of whom he said, I must decrease, and he must increase. Our first lesson said, 'the mercy of the Lord is upon all flesh' that's upon me, and you and everyone else watching today, and all those people we walk past everyday, whether they stop and smile at us or not. He, the Lord, is the one who offers to guide our feet, he offers to love our souls and all through showing us light. This is a light which not only guides our feet and our paths in this life, but steers us clear of the shadow of death through the eternal, into a life which is everlasting beyond. This is a light whose rays reverberate and refract from the very beginning of creation far beyond our imaginations, far beyond the depths of our science, far beyond the stretch of our history. This is a light which is the dayspring from on high, this light is of course, the light of Jesus Christ.

I'll let you into another secret, none of us are very good drivers, at least not drivers of our own souls. Guidance and grace may not be things that we attain overnight, but if we walk on with hope in our heart and with our eyes and our prize and with the prayer books in our hands we will not walk alone. I promise you that we will walk with everyone who has watched this video today, we will walk with the church from myriad centuries all around the world, and of course we will walk most importantly with the one who created, redeemed and sustains us. You will walk with God, who is Father, Son and Holy Ghost.

Amen.