

Becoming

Ez.36:28/Jn.15:16-7

As some of you know, about 19 years ago Church House Publishing published a book I wrote for couples preparing for their marriage. To my astonishment, it is still selling, and has sold over 15,000 copies. I never pretended there was a word of wisdom in it – it was there to provoke talk between the couples, not to give advice. But amongst the many anonymised stories in it were words that I believe really were wisdom. They weren't my words, but something said to me by a very young - in fact a teenage - husband-to-be. We had been talking about when he thought they would actually be married – I didn't mean the date. I meant would it be when they said the vows, or when they put on the rings, or signed the registers, or whatever. I think what he said was the most profound insight about marriage I have ever had. He said "I don't think I shall ever stop getting married". I asked him what he meant. He went on to explain that the words in the service said 'All that I am I give to you'. But then he said - 'But I don't know all that I am yet, and when I discover more I must marry that too.' He would be married, but could, as it were, become *more* married as time went on. So this morning I want us to think about this idea of becoming what we already are.

There is a promise God makes in Ezekiel: "you shall become my people, and I will become your God." At face value, it implies that God is not their God at the moment of those words being spoken - and yet obviously that was not true. Ezekiel was writing to a people who had heard God's words of promise to be the nation's God for generation after generation. So what the promise appears to mean is that what is already true in some measure will become true in an even greater measure. The actual state of God being their God, and them being his people was a present reality, but it had the potential for much greater reality. Paul writes to the Galatians talking about the mix of behaviour that he sees in them. Sometimes they are led by the Spirit, sometimes they allow themselves to be controlled by self-indulgence. So their actual goodness is only a shadow of their potential goodness. They can become far more than they are.

In today's Gospel reading Jesus says that he had chosen his disciples, rather than them choosing him. He goes on to say that he commissioned them, and he also gives them a command. Chosen - commissioned, commanded. The activity is all on God's part, in Christ. But often people talk as if it was the other way round. They decide to follow Jesus, they volunteer to work for him in some specific way, and they do their best to be like him. That use of language puts all the doing on the human side, and God is to be a grateful recipient of what crumbs we give to him. There is a chorus of extremely dubious theology which begins "I have decided to follow Jesus". If we take Jesus's words this morning seriously we have to throw such an idea out of the window. Jesus is the decision maker "I chose you", not us "you did not choose me." But we are chosen not because we are already perfect, but because God wants us to be. Even that sequence of happenings implies that. We are chosen, and commissioned to do something. At the point of commissioning, we haven't done anything at all. And last of all, we are given a command - which has to be worked out in practice as well: "love one another". We are chosen, commissioned and commanded because of our potential, not because of what we have already achieved. But we are chosen.

So the pattern is there in Ezekiel, in Paul and in the Gospel reading: we *are* something, because of God's grace. But we *can* be something even more exciting, if we will allow our potential to be exploited, again by God's grace. He will put a heart of flesh in place of Israel's heart of stone. He will make those Galatian Christians more whole-hearted followers of Christ. He will make those raw disciples into seasoned witnesses of his love. What they will be is only glimpsed at. And what they will be in this life is perhaps only a shadow of what we will be one day. So just as the couple leaving church have to become the married couple they are, so we have to become what God has made us, in baptism, by our calling to be his people. We have to become what we are. Martin Luther put it like this:

“This life therefore is not righteousness, but growth in righteousness; not health but healing, not being but becoming, not rest but exercise. We are not what we shall be but we are growing towards it; the process is not yet finished but it is going on; this is not the end but it is the road. All does not yet gleam in glory but all is being purified.” Professor Fred Bruce, who I once had the privilege of meeting, said something which takes on from that last phrase of Luther’s. He wrote “Sanctification is glory begun. Glory is sanctification completed.”

There is something intrinsically healthy about the idea of "becoming". It picks up the idea of growth and development, of the pilgrim journey we are all on. It copes with the apparent contradictions that we sometimes say. There is a hymn with the chorus "Go tell everyone the news that the Kingdom of God has come". And yet we pray "Your kingdom come." Has God's Kingdom come, or is it yet to be? The two appear contradictory. But in fact they are not. We say that God's Kingdom is here, where people make him King - but we look forward to a time when that Kingdom is not the hidden or small thing it can be now, but is all-embracing and obvious to everyone. It is really here, but we are right to pray for it to come. Jesus used "growth" pictures in talking about the Kingdom - the mustard seed, the seed growing secretly, the corn falling on the good soil and so on. What *is* will *become* something even greater. And we are caught up in that process of growth. Jesus has chosen us, not we him. He has commissioned us, rather than us offering to do something for him. And he hasn't made a request, or dropped a hint, he has given us a command to love one another. If we are chosen, commissioned and commanded people, let's get on with becoming what we are, and growing together in faith and hope and love. That is not only about how we relate to God, but how we relate to each other and the world around us. So can I leave you with a thought from the great theologian Martin Buber: "Men become what they are - sons of God - by becoming what they are - brothers of their brothers."