

EPIPHANY 3 2023
St George's Windsor

Our New Testament reading today told of Jesus's call to the Disciples (Simon, Andrew, James and John) as he walked by the Sea of Galilee. For just a few minutes, I wish to reflect on Jesus's call to *us*.

The words of the hymn that we have just sung were written by Horatius Bonar. Bonar was a minister of the Church of Scotland, who lived during much of the nineteenth century, from 1808 until 1889. He was, so I have learnt, a poet, biographer, and an acknowledged scholar who, in 1853, was awarded a Doctorate of Divinity by the University of Aberdeen. He of course is unknown to most of us, but his hymns (and he wrote a number of them) live on in the minds and memories of many people. Perhaps, the most familiar of them is one that reflects on Jesus's call to us. It begins: "I heard the voice of Jesus say, / 'Come unto me and rest'". It was the second hymn of today's service.

A hymn with a similar theme, Jesus's call to us, was written by another quite long-lived nineteenth century hymn-writer, better known to many of us, Mrs C. F. Alexander (the author of 'All Things Bright and Beautiful' among other hymns) who lived from 1819 – 1895. The first verse of the hymn that comes to mind is:

Jesus calls us! O'er the tumult
Of our life's wild restless sea
Day by day his voice is sounding,
Saying, 'Christian, follow me'.

Both hymns speak of Jesus's call to us as being perhaps the answer to our inner restlessness. "I heard the voice of Jesus say, / 'Come unto me and rest'". "Jesus calls us! O'er the tumult / Of our life's wild restless sea".

For those of us to whom the hymns speak, they strike a chord in us because we know that we are restless people. We are simply not at ease in the world in which we are bound to live. For all the apparent comfort that this materialistic world provides for us, we experience an inward *dis-ease* of the spirit. Something is wrong. Of course, we put a brave face on things and, in some ways, our courage is commendable. But, in the end, it is only a way of coping. The *dis-ease* remains, eating away at something deep within us; something that we find hard to name but which reminds us of its presence day by day through a lingering ache, hunger, thirst, spiritual unease.

However, to us the hymns do often speak. "I heard the voice of Jesus say, / Come unto me and rest". "Jesus calls us! O'er the tumult / Of our life's wild restless sea". For us, the call of Jesus is a call that brings some healing. While we are on this earth of course that healing is only ever partial. We rarely more than half trust its promise.

And what is that promise? Before we find an answer to that question, we must diagnose the *dis-ease*.

I have often quoted the poet Philip Larkin in the course of my Sunday sermons. I have done so because the agnostic Larkin, so I believe, gives voice to the restlessness, the *dis-ease* of so many people who have lived through the latter part of the twentieth century and beyond. In one of his poems, Philip Larkin wrote:

“In everyone there sleeps / A sense of life lived according to love. / To some it means the difference they could make / By loving others, but across most it sweeps / As all they might have done had they been loved. / That nothing cures.”

Larkin’s diagnosis of our prevalent *dis-ease* is that it is rooted in a profound and desperate yearning to be loved. The tragedy of our lives is that, so far as Larkin is concerned, there is no cure for that yearning; that restlessness.

However, as I have said, to us the hymns still speak. “I heard the voice of Jesus say, / Come unto me and rest”. “Jesus calls us! O’er the tumult / Of our life’s wild restless sea”. For us, the call of Jesus is a call that brings some healing, promises some cure, even though, while we are on this earth, that cure is only ever partial. We rarely more than half trust its promise.

And so I return to the question: What is that promise? The promise is, quite simply, that we *are* loved. The call of Jesus is a call to follow him in trusting in the Father’s love; in believing that the truest thing about us is that we are made *by* love and made *for* love and that, as St Paul was to teach us, nothing in all creation can separate us from that love.

Of course, we rarely more than half believe the promise. Our faith is feeble. We tremble on the brink. Yet, in as much as we do hear the call and believe the promise, our lives begin to change. Assured that we are in safe hands, that all things shall be well, and that love will speak the final word, we find that peace out of which grows the gratitude, patience and kindness that our troubled world so needs.

Nonetheless, for all its welcome outcome, is not this faith delusion; childish fantasy? Perhaps it depends on what you make of that lingering ache, hunger, thirst, spiritual unease. Maybe it depends on what you make of our perennial restlessness.

For Larkin, it is all part of the tragedy of human life. It is incredibly sad. For others, it is not unreasonable to judge that our restlessness is a positive stirring in response to a ‘lure’, an ‘invitation’ from beyond what we see as our normal horizon (from what some people call ‘God’) heard by some sort of intuition. For such people, it is

not unreasonable to hold that 'intuition' is a way of 'knowing'; something that may be trusted.

For many, the 'lure', the 'invitation' is refined and focussed in the 'call' of Jesus Christ. The heart's stirring to the call could well be its response to something 'real'. The heart, it has been said, has its reasons while remaining restless until it finds its rest in God.

I heard the voice of Jesus say,
 'Come unto me and rest;
Lay down, thou weary one, lay down
 Thy head upon my breast.'
I came to Jesus as I was,
 Weary, and worn, and sad;
I found in him a resting-place,
 And he has made me glad.