

Sunday May 18th 2003

Easter 5
Aldersgate Sunday

Readings: Psalm 130
Romans 8: 31-39

Hymns: 216; 740; 520; 706

SUFFICIENT, SOVEREIGN, SAVING GRACE

If I were cast away on Roy Plumley's desert island, I'd have to identify a book (it couldn't be either Shakespeare or the Bible) that I'd want to have with me. An impossible question, of course, but I suspect that high on my list of leading contenders would be a volume known affectionately to all preachers as *Peake's Commentary*. It's one-volume companion to the Bible and, if I were to be denied the Holy Book itself, it would be a most acceptable substitute.

But who exactly is (or was) the eponymous hero of this volume? Well, a hero he certainly was. Arthur S. Peake was a Methodist, a Primitive Methodist, who became one of the country's most respectable scholars. He was a layman and wonderfully ecumenical in his nature and temperament. He also had a burning conscience; he wanted to do his bit to make the world a better place. On one occasion, moved by the poverty and squalor of the Great Depression, he wrote a book that called Christians to arms (metaphorically let it be understood). He wrote a book which he wanted to entitle *Who is offended and I burn not?* This was a verse from St. Paul's second letter to the Corinthians and it shows how the apostle could not contemplate injustice or oppression without burning with righteous indignation. If people suffer, I should want to do something about it; I should want to change the circumstances that make them suffer; I should want to do that with every ounce of my energy, every effort of my will, every atom of my being, and with all my rational self. Who is offended and I burn not?

Peake's publishers urged caution. That, they argued, is not the snappiest, sexiest, title in the world. Books sell on their titles. So can we think of something a little more eye-catching, something more succinct, something that will get the cash registers moving? Well, Peake did reconsider and in

the end the little book came out entitled *Prisoners of Hope*. And it sold reasonably well so perhaps the publishers were right.

What, I wonder, would they have made of the title of my sermon this morning? *Sufficient, sovereign, saving grace!* Please! Surely you could have found a more economical form of words, a more concise title? If, when we get home from this morning's service, anyone asks us what the preacher spoke about this morning, what chance do we have of remembering even the title? Please, preacher, have another think.

Whilst I have some sympathy with that point of view, I don't think I want to yield one inch. These words form one line of a Charles Wesley hymn, the one we're going to sing when I've finished. Only Wesley could have fitted all those words into one line, it's the work of a genius. But I don't cling to them for poetical reasons but rather to illustrate a very salutary fact. Words which once bristled with controversy, phrases which were once landmarks in people's self-understanding, sentences which changed a whole worldview, either go out of fashion when the battle they fought is won and done with or else they dull through sheer familiarity. These are just such words. And, far from turning them into a snappier, sexier, zippier jingle, I want to rescue them for our own day. I want to shout from the rooftops: "Sufficient, sovereign, saving grace, thou shouldst be living at this hour; England hath need of thee!"

This week I heard the story of a museum in Nottingham. It had recently been opened and had won a huge prize in recognition of its state-of-the-art, interactive, highly imaginative displays. And also for its "mission statement." This museum has succeeded in getting young people to visit it and, among them, young people in trouble with the law. It sets out to interest visitors in local history but not in a way that fixes the attention on the past. The declared purpose of this little museum is to use the past to stimulate more imaginative and committed stances in the present and or the future. I heard one child being interviewed. He (or she, the voice hadn't broken) said how moved s/he had been to hear how a local hero had suffered so much in the struggle for the vote. This child hadn't realised how passionately his/her forbears had fought for rights which these days most people neglect. "When I'm old enough," s/he said, "I'm going to remember how important it is to honour those who've fought for this and the obvious way to honour them is

3.

to make sure I go out and vote myself.” Amen, I heard myself saying under the duvet, Amen.

It’s the same with the idea behind this morning’s sermon title. Let me set the scene as I try to explain it.

The year is 1739 and John and Charles Wesley, recently converted, are beginning their extraordinary ministry. One huge step for John was to take up a challenge from his friend George Whitfield who urged him to put himself about a bit, to get out of doors, to submit to become more vile, to preach to the unchurched. This was quite a thing to ask of a gentleman but Wesley was up to it and off he went to Hanham Mount, just outside Bristol, where he preached to a group of miners about the love of God. Some were so amazed at being addressed by this elegant young clergyman that tears of joy ran down their faces carving their way like rivers through the thick coal dust which caked their cheeks. This was a key moment in Wesley’s ministry but it raised a serious theological point.

George Whitfield, a wonderful Christian and fine preacher, subscribed to Calvinist doctrine. At its heart was the idea of predestination or, rather (and more perniciously) double predestination. That is, our sovereign God and he alone chooses those on whom his favour rests. He, and no being other than he, bestows his grace on his elect. This notion whose original aim had been to safeguard a very high doctrine of God, ended up having social repercussions that were awkward, difficult, discriminatory, unacceptable, downright blasphemous. Wesley saw it as blasphemy and said so powerfully in a sermon he preached under the title *Free Grace*. What was the point of preaching the love of God, he argued, if many of those who hear have absolutely no chance of knowing that love? What is the point of evangelism, what indeed was the point of the Incarnation, if men and women can do nothing at all to recognize or claim God’s grace? The doctrine of predestination makes all preachers liars or fools or both.

This sermon was printed and had a wide circulation. George Whitfield and his supporters were furious. And they weren’t helped when Charles Wesley, taking up his brother’s cause, wrote a hymn which went much further in emphasising the universality (rather than the particularity) of God’s grace.

God was in Christ reconciling *the world* to himself. God so loved *the world* that he gave us his only-begotten Son. We're going to sing the hymn in a few minutes time but I want to read it now. Just listen for the word "all;" that was the word that stuck in the gullet of Calvinists. And identify any synonym or periphrasis that suggests the universality of grace. This hymn stang; it quite simply rejected out-of-hand any notion that the grace of God was limited to just a few, some mystical elect, the favoured club. The Wesley brothers have often been called Tories and so they were, but in the same way Abraham Lincoln was a Republican. The words did not mean then what they mean now. Certainly, the thinking put forward in John's sermon and Charles's hymn, envisages the enfranchisement of working class people from a theological point of view well over a century before the politicians caught on and caught up. This is a theological position whose political outworkings are only possible in a democracy. Everyone is precious in God's eyes. The good news of the gospel is for all. Just listen to the hymn:

*Father, whose everlasting love
Thy only Son for sinners gave,
Whose grace to all did freely move,
And sent him down the world to save:*

*Help us thy mercy to extol,
Immense, unfathomed, unconfined;
To praise the Lamb who died for all,
The general Saviour of mankind.*

*Thy undistinguishing regard
Was cast on Adam's fallen race;
For all thou hast in Christ prepared
Sufficient, sovereign, saving grace.*

*The world he suffered to redeem;
For all he has the atonement made;
For those that will not come to him
The ransom of his life was paid.*

*Arise, O God, maintain thy cause!
The fullness of the nation call;*

5.

*Lift up the standard of thy cross,
And all shall own thou diedst for all.*

This was dynamite. The Calvinists ganged up and shouted rude things at the Wesleys. One Sunday they picketed the Foundery. Those coming to church that day had to run the gauntlet of some angry people who leafleted them with a tract that denounced this wayward universalism. When John Wesley faced his congregation he showed them his copy of this tract and asked if they'd been given one too. When they sheepishly showed their own copies, Wesley invited them to follow his example. He tore the offending pamphlet into shreds and threw the pieces in their air. The people followed suit and the service that Sunday began with a ticker tape welcome to a theology of grace which should never, ever, for one moment, for a nano-second be lost sight of.

Calvinism in its cruder manifestations can be shown to have played a significant part in the development of apartheid in South Africa, in the slave trade, in the troubles of Ireland. The Puritanism which shaped the United States, high-minded though it undoubtedly was, can also be shown to have shaped a world view that allows Americans to see themselves as God's chosen ones and the rest of the world as somehow inferior. Good Wesleyan theology counters all that. There is sufficient, sovereign, saving grace for all. Amazing grace, how sweet the sound, that saved a wretch like me.

This is a battle I want to go on fighting. These are sentiments never want silenced. This is music I never want to end. There is still balm in Gilead. There is always hope. Even for the most wretched, the least capable, the most downtrodden, the vilest offender, the outcast.

Praise be to almighty God for this optimism of grace that offers such hope to all his people.

God help us.

Amen.