

"You do not magnify Christ by belittling others"

Matthew 16:16,17 "Blessed are your eyes because they see, and your ears because they hear. For I tell you the truth, many prophets and righteous men longed to see what you see but did not see it, and to hear what you hear but did not hear it."

"Young man, sit down!" That was the title of a book for children in which I first read the story of William Carey. Little did I imagine then that I would teach for nearly 10 years (and my wife also, in her spare time from caring for our three young daughters) in the college which he, Marshman and Ward founded in Serampore, living in the very house in which they lived. Some of you older ones here may have been our students in those days - you will have changed since then, so forgive us if we do not instantly recognise you! Please do introduce yourselves.

To have served at Serampore was a very, very great privilege - as also for us to continue that link as secretaries of "Friends of Serampore". And now you have added a new and deeply moving instalment of that privilege by honouring me with a DD. I know that the purpose of this is to thank us both for the service we have been enabled to give (rather than to recognise scholastic achievement!) and my wife and I are profoundly grateful, as I am to her for her life-long support. You have added to the honour by inviting me to give the address at this Commemoration Service, on such an auspicious occasion in the history of this United Theological College - I do thank you most sincerely, Master, President, Registrar, Principal and all who have been involved in deciding to bestow this honour.

That sentence with which I began comes from a famous incident when, as a young pastor in England, Carey was asked to suggest a topic for discussion by his local ministers' meeting - he proposed that they should consider "whether the command given to the apostles to teach all nations was not binding on all succeeding ministers to the end of the world, seeing that the accompanying promise was of equal extent." And a senior figure shut him up: "Young man, sit down! When God pleases to convert the heathen, He'll do it without consulting you or me!"

My next encounter with Carey was at theological college, when I had to write an essay on his theology. That older man had represented a doctrine

of the sovereignty of God in which we are left helpless. Even, whether a soul goes to heaven or hell is God's choice alone, and we can do nothing. As I explored the books that most influenced Carey, I discovered a reaction against such extremes: faced with the challenge and invitation of Christ, we must *choose*. And as for those who lived before Christ, or had not heard the Gospel, God could not and would not condemn them for what was not their fault. Therefore the Gospel must be preached. Within five years, through Carey's persuading, the Baptist Missionary Society had been born and he was on his way to India.

But even as I prepared my essay I realised that, in coldly strict logic, such preaching would result in many hearing, and not accepting the Gospel, and therefore going to hell! The preaching of the Gospel would make things worse for them, not better. But did such a thought even enter Carey's mind? No. Because first and foremost he was filled with wonder at the glory of the Gospel of Jesus Christ - to know *Him* is what counts above all else.

And so we come to our text: "**Blessed are your eyes because they see** - many righteous men, and women, longed to see what you see but did not see it." That blessing puts all strict logic aside. Yes, already they were described and counted as "righteous" - but they had not seen Christ, the treasure, the pearl of great price.

My wife and I knew one former Brahmin very well. He put it like this: "I have sometimes regretted joining the Christian Church, but I have never, ever, regretted following Jesus Christ." This was Yisu Das Tiwari, father of our Senate Registrar, whom we knew earlier in England as well as here in India when he joined the staff at Serampore in the 60s. He had spent one year at Regent's Park College, Oxford, at the same time that I was a theologian there, and he and I, and also my fiancée (as she then was), became close friends. The friendship continued - he met us at Jabalpur on our way across India (in those days travel was by ship and then train!) and brought us a basket of those wonderful Nagpur oranges. After we had been here for about a year, we sent him a copy of the prayer letter which we circulated to our supporters in the UK. He wrote back, "You have written very truly about the poverty of my country, but you have said nothing about the tender beauty of Bengali home life." We never forgot that gentle rebuke, from someone whom we have often spoken about as perhaps the finest Christian we have ever known, and it fed into that attitude of respect which is my theme this morning.

Let me tell you more about our arrival in India. I had degrees in Physics and Theology, and when we offered ourselves to the Baptist Missionary Society, they decided that Serampore College, and in particular the Physics Department, was just the place for someone with that combination of subjects. I was aged 26, young and full of zeal. I had a theme text, from the words of Paul in Acts 26: "To open their eyes, to turn them from darkness to light and from the power of Satan to God" - and then I met the Head of Physics at Serampore!

Prof Radharaman Ganguly was an impressive Bengali Hindu figure. Impressive to look at, with a beard like Rabindranath Tagore. Impressive as a teacher, with a profound influence on his students. Impressive as a physicist - when he took his MSc from Calcutta University, he took second place; the one who took first place was CV Raman, who went on to win a Nobel Prize for Physics. Then in his *spare* time from running the Physics Dept at Serampore, he accepted a challenge and began to read History - he gained his BA and then, still in his spare time, stood *first* in his MA! He was widely known for his integrity - when in the 1960s some of the citizens of Serampore formed a new party to challenge corruption, they invited Prof Ganguly to be their president. And as for his spirituality, his Hindu spirituality, when my wife and I were invited to his modest home, he showed us the first room on the left inside the front door and said: "This is my prayer room."

This zealous, eager young missionary had to do some very hard thinking, and do it quickly! I had to be honest about what I saw, I had to honour that man - but I also had to honour my calling as a missionary of Jesus Christ. What about that matter of "turning them from darkness to light"? I found my first clue in the story, which many will have been remembering this week, of when Christ was presented in the Temple. The old man Simeon took him in his arms and said with such joy, "Now my eyes have seen." All his life until this moment he had lived without seeing or knowing Christ, and yet how was he *described* until this point? - "righteous and devout...waiting." Could I not speak of my head of department in that way? True, he was not living *before* Christ and he did know Christians, but somehow his eyes had not yet been opened to Christ. If only he could *see*, what blessing for him! In the meantime, I could wholeheartedly speak of him as Simeon was described: "righteous and devout". You do not make Christ greater by not appreciating goodness wherever you find it.

Then I discovered this same principle in the text I have chosen today. "Prophets and righteous people" - before Christ, and apart from Christ, yet Jesus did not hesitate to describe them thus. And I was so glad, I *am* so glad.

I found an illustration in my own subject of Physics. Most of you will have heard the name of Isaac Newton, one of the greatest scientists of all time, who discovered the Laws of Gravity and of Motion. I have seen through telescope and microscope things that he never saw, wonderful things that would have thrilled him beyond measure. He never saw; I have seen. Does that make me greater than he was? Do I have to belittle Isaac Newton and say, "He wasn't much of a scientist, was he?"

So, no boasting for us - only privilege, only blessing. As Jesus said, "**Blessed are your eyes because they see...** Many prophets and righteous men longed to see what you see but did not see it." You do not magnify Christ by belittling anyone else.

As well as Hindus, my wife and I counted fine Sikhs and Parsees among our friends. Later on, back in the UK, most of our friends of other Faiths have been, and are, Muslims. Yes, within Islam there are fanatics, as there are in every Faith, our own included; but equally there are some among our friends who can only be described (if we are being honest) as "righteous and devout".

I have a problem about Islam, as I do about Sikhism: these Faiths were founded many centuries *after* the time of Jesus Christ. *Why* in the providence of God should this be? Why did God not overrule it? I still cannot see the answer to that question, and it has to take its place along with life's other great unanswered questions. But you do not solve the problem, and you certainly do not magnify Christ, by belittling Muhammad or Guru Nanak. We have a neighbour and great friend who is from Malaysia, married to a British man. Her name is Siti and she has a wonderful, radiant smile. If she were a Christian, you would say she was a fine advertisement for her faith. But she is a righteous and devout Muslim. We will not magnify Christ if we diminish her.

However, after saying all this, the big issue remains: how do we fulfil the commission to preach the Gospel to every creature? How do we uphold the heart of our faith, that by his death on the cross Jesus is the Saviour of the world, uniquely? Two texts, often cited, are crucial here, and we must be honest with them.

The first is Acts 4:10-12: "By the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified but whom God raised from the dead, this man stands before you healed... There is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved." This is where a little bit of Greek helps!

Don't worry, I'm not going to quote any - but it will remind all of you graduates why you had to learn it, and how useful it can be! Because unlike English, and unlike Bengali (which is the Indian language I know, and I think it is the same for the others), Greek uses the same word for "healed" and for "saved". You have to tell from the context which sense is uppermost, but the meanings overlap and affect each other. So here, read these verses in Greek and you find that Peter is saying, "How has this lame man been healed so wonderfully? By the name of Jesus, that's how - there is no other name by which we can be healed in this way." And our thoughts of salvation blend into that, but it's not primarily a doctrinal assertion; it's about the healing of a lifelong cripple.

The second passage is more fundamental. It is from the occasion when Jesus talked with his disciples in the Upper Room, on the night before he died, John 14:6: "I am the way and the truth and the life. **No one comes to the Father except through me.**" How can our friends, like Prof Ganguly, like Siti, fit into this? I believe the answer is, again, to read what is actually said - not this time in Greek but in whatever language you normally use - and also to be alert to what is *not* said. Jesus did not say, "No one comes to the Father except through *knowing* me." What is the difference? Let me give you another story from my experience.

Before leaving England for India, we lived for three years in the city of Birmingham, and for 18 months I travelled daily to work by bus, in and out of the city centre, along a street like many older ones in this country. In those days it was lined from one end to the other with fine buildings of several floors: mostly shops and offices, with no gaps between them. Then, about 30 years ago, they demolished many of these buildings in order to

build a fine modern concert hall, conference centre, etc, and they did not fill in all the gaps - and now you can see that the road passes over a canal.

You can see it! All those times I had crossed it, and never knew it was there, never knew that I was crossing a bridge. It's a fine sight. But do you realise? I did not need to see it, or know that there was a bridge, in order for it to carry me across. And in the same way, may it not be that by his death on the cross Christ has built a bridge, "suffering and dying to make atonement for our sins", and that bridge is *strong*, strong enough to carry us even if we do not know it is there?

May it not be that some who are reckoned as "righteous and devout" may come into the presence of God, into "the Father's house", not knowing until they arrive that they are there only because of a bridge? And they will turn round and look, and see - see Jesus, the Jesus who suffered and died to bring us to God. They will see, and the seeing will be such a blessing and a joy. They will share that blessing which is yours and mine already, because we do see. How much more is it a blessing to know, than to be in ignorance - to see, than to be blind! That is the story we have, to tell to the nations.

How better to end than by returning again to William Carey? Many a time I have stood in the cemetery at Serampore and read again the words which he asked to be placed on his tomb - the words are old-fashioned, the thought is profound: "A wretched, poor and helpless worm, on Thy kind arms I fall." As has been said, he was "an awestruck, surrendered personality."

The story has often been told how, near the end of his life, he was visited by a younger person who talked about his many achievements: Dr Carey this, Dr Carey that! And after a while Carey gently reproached him: "You have spoken much about Dr Carey. When I am gone, speak not of Dr Carey - speak of Dr Carey's Saviour."

Amen to that - from me, and I hope from all of you, always.

Edward HB Williams