

S.PETER. 2019

Sermon by Michael Roberts, former Principal of Westcott House, Cambridge

It was around 40 years ago that Idris Shah's stories about Nazzarudin were popular. Nazzarudin comes from the Sufi tradition: an unpredictable sage. One day the mosque village elders invited Nazzarudin to preach at the Friday prayers. He climbed the pulpit and asked them a question: 'Do you know what I am going to say?' And of course, they shouted, 'No'. So he replied, 'If that's the case, there's no point in saying *anything*'. And he gets down and goes home. The elders aren't best pleased but feel they ought not to be outfoxed and invite him back the next week. "Well, do you know what I'm going to say?' 'Yes', they reply, having decided this would get a sermon. 'Good', says Nazzarudin, 'then there's no need for me to say it'. And goes home. The elders are now determined not to be bested and invite him back yet again. 'Do you or don't you know?'. 'Ah', they retorted, 'some of us do and some of us don't', thinking that really would outwit him. 'Oh, that's excellent', replies the sage, 'then those who do can tell those who don't'. And he goes home.

It's a subtle and witty fable. And one for our own times as well as those of the several years ago that Richard submitted himself to having hands laid on him for ordination as a priest. We find ourselves being asked questions to which there are no obvious answers: how do we read what is *not* being said as well as what is? Who is speaking truthfully? How can we know? Who is a trustworthy interpreter of the times? In all the multiplicity of voices, do we just have to shout louder in order to be heard, like the proverbial Englishman abroad? Is humility a virtue at a discount in the public sphere when self-promotion appears to be the route to attention? Is it possible to overcome tribal loyalties in order to address the common good? In the last 40 years, it's manifest the Christian message in our part of the globe has been side-lined. In the villages around the edge of Exmoor, you can count the number of worshippers on a Sunday on two hands and often just the one. And I am likely to be amongst the youngest present, despite having - for the moment- a free tv licence. This isn't Richard's fault! Nor Anna's, nor mine. There have been seismic shifts in perception that have left us wrong-footed. And in all this cacophony, at a time when integrity has been at a premium, we have shot ourselves in the foot over untrustworthiness concerning abuse. The last 40 years *have* been difficult. So the need for those who have, in Paul's words, '...fought the good fight, finished the race, kept the faith' has been of huge, if largely unacknowledged, significance. Richard has been part of that unsung band. And it's right to celebrate that faithfulness. But not right to be cowed by the task before us.

One of the things we need to be delivered from is the prison of negativity. Peter has made a sufficient nuisance of himself that Herod arrests him and throws him into jail, bound with two chains and closely guarded. Not a promising situation. But he finds himself freed from the chains and exhorted to wrap his cloak around himself and follow a liberating angel. The gate swings open; not a movement from the guards. A dream? No, an unexpected reality. "Now I am sure that the Lord has sent his angel and rescued me from the hands of Herod and from all that the Jewish people were expecting". Martin Luther King's chaotic personal life may be under scrutiny again but his persistent call for recognition of equality under God - free at last, free at last, I thank my God I'm free at last - continues to resonate. We *do* have a gospel to proclaim. It is about deliverance. Deliverance from deliberate untruth and manipulated half-truth; deliverance from the pressure to dance to the tunes of commerce and social convention. Deliverance from the weasel phrase, 'I haven't done anything wrong', meaning intentional deceit but just within the limits of the law. We *need* the chains to fall off. We *need* the guardians of surreptitious and overt blame to fall asleep. We *need* the gates of destructive values that diminish us to swing open. And the key? The key is a declaration, 'You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God' *in* a key - a tune, a tone - that resonates in society as a whole with a desire to escape the narcissistic prisons that have been created. We're told our youngsters are the unhappiest in Europe. We face daily a division within the body politic that causes wild utterance, derision and scorn. We live with a bewildering miasma of alternative facts. Yes, chains falling off and doors opening should be welcome! And they *will* if we know what to listen for and how to share the truth we have to offer.

If you have been to S. Peter's in Rome, you'll remember the splendour as you enter. There's something of the disciples' wonder at the temple in Jerusalem - "Look, master, at these wonderful stones" - and there's something uplifting about it. Enhanced these days by Pope Francis sitting in Peter's chair with his stress on mercy. An emphasis appropriate for one who recognises human frailty but understands what Basil of Caesarea meant when he said that the human being is an animal whose vocation is to become god. Peter knew all too well human frailty: "I tell you, I do not know the man". He knew what Paul intended by 'my strength is made perfect in weakness'. So going into the basilica some years ago for the first time, I was interested to stand before the magnificent bronze of Peter seated with the keys. Interested because my father, an atheist GP, regarded that very statue as the epitome of religious absurdity: all those millions of pilgrims coming to kiss the feet of a statue! And far from finding it ridiculous, I was overwhelmed. The feet are indeed polished by the lips of untold numbers. Arnolfo di Cambio, who cast the bronze in the 13th century, has Peter seated whilst holding up his right hand in blessing. The left presses the keys against his chest. But di Cambio has an unexpected touch. Peter wears a sling to support the weight of responsibility the keys represent. Yes, a recognition of weakness. But a wonderfully generous understanding of the vocation that belongs to all of us weak disciples to be stewards of God's grace.

Religion is always going to be a target for scorn. By its very nature, it points away from self-sufficiency. It's humble before the immensity of creation and yet confident of a purpose of which we may actually be a part. It's realistic about human folly but optimistic about our capacity for greatness. When we have a proper sense of treasure in clay jars, then we can deal with the folly and rejoice in the good. The wonderfully-named Quaker, Greenleaf Whittier, wrote a poem about what he saw as the idiocy of liturgical worship, comparing it to the drug, soma, used in ecstatic dance by dervishes. It ends in verses that begin, *Dear Lord and Father of mankind, forgive our foolish ways....* We sing it to that lovely tune, Repton, but are largely unaware of the delicious irony of joining in his criticism. The clay jars, nonetheless, contain real treasure. The human being is an animal whose vocation is to become god, what the Orthodox call *theosis*.

We need to understand what we *already* know and be able to communicate it. We can only do that by taking responsibility together for the keys entrusted to us. Keys that Richard has held, keys to locks that we may not realise are ready for us to turn. When Richard came to visit S. Mark, Bromley, as a possible curate, at the behest of Mark Santer, then principal at Westcott, he did not know what we call these days the back-story. As a very young incumbent, I was accorded a curate because the parish contained a general hospital and it was reckoned it wasn't feasible for one person to fulfil both posts at the same time. The first curate found the set-up - and that, of course, included me - impossible. The diocese had to split us up and both of us were wounded by the experience. Richard appeared on the doorstep at the vicarage. I don't doubt he was nervous but so was I in view of that previous failure. I opened the door and to my surprise - and, if I'm honest, initial consternation - was embraced by one of his bear-hugs. It was, as it happened, just what was required. Chains may fall away and we may not even know that we had the key necessary. Grace will not and cannot be tied down. Perhaps today as we look back, we can rejoice in the grace that has been at work, recognised and unrecognised, that makes us all part of the Body of Christ. All, in our own ways, responsible for holding the keys. All aware of the nature of the feet of clay we have. All aware that, like Peter, we have a grasp, even if an inchoate one, of who the Christ is. Perhaps, even more, to know that it isn't *we* who believe in God but that *God* believes in *us*. Not *we* who know but we that *are known*. "Do you love me?", Jesus asks Peter, following that experience of only recently having gone out of the high priest's courtyard and wept bitterly for his threefold denial. So to us, "Do you love me?" Yes, Lord, you know that we love you. "Feed my sheep". We, too, are entrusted with keys. Keys of grace. Keys of realism. Keys to hope. Thanks be to God.