

Trinity 16 2015 Chapelle Achard 11am

A young woman once told me how she cured her husband's bad habit of coming home drunk and incapable. She found him collapsed on the doorstep where his friends had left after ringing the doorbell. She filled the bath with cold water, guided him upstairs, and tipped him in it, fully clothed.

'He was a bit of a slow learner,' she said. 'I had to do it twice, before he understood.'

The disciples were slow learners and Jesus must, at times, have been tempted to despair over them.

In the previous chapter Peter has recognised Jesus as the Messiah but failed to understand his mission which will involve betrayal, execution and rising from the dead on the third day. Peter, James and John have seen his glory as he is transfigured on the mountain, but want to stay there. The rest of the disciples have failed to help the man seeking healing for his dumb son. Jesus comes to the rescue, healing him, even though at first he appears to die. For a second time he tells them he will be betrayed, put to death and rise again on the third day.

Do they understand? Not a bit! Afraid to ask him what he means, they argue amongst themselves about which one of them is the greatest instead. Jesus knows what they are doing and tries once more to explain. His values, and those of God his father, are different from theirs. Greatness lies in being willing to take the last place, not seek the first, and to serve others. To receive God, they have to receive the weak and the vulnerable and he puts a child in their midst as a visual aid.

He will go on in the next chapter, where for the third time he tells them of his coming betrayal, death and resurrection, to try to teach them by means of a child once more. Only this time he tells them that to receive God's kingdom they must become like child, totally vulnerable and trusting in the love of parents to provide for their needs.

Do they understand? Not a bit. When it comes to the crunch and the betrayal takes place, in spite of Jesus' teaching and examples, they will all run away. Slow learners indeed.

But they are not alone, are they? What about us? We have the benefit of knowing the end of the story. What Jesus told them is true. Yes, he was betrayed and put to death, but YES he rose again on the third day, victorious over all the powers of sin and death. God's way of love and sacrifice, self-denial and humility, service and forgiveness not only works, it is the only way. But do we really live in the light of this truth? On a good day, by the grace of God, yes we do. But we all have bad days too.

Days when we lose our childlike trust and dependence on God, and become fearful once more, needing reassurance in our own status and achievements. In our preoccupation with ourselves we forget what we have learnt and put ourselves first, so that self-denial, humility and service are forgotten. We lose sight of the Jesus whom we are called to recognize in a child until the child drowns in the sea of our own indifference and lack of love and, only when we see it lying lifeless on a Turkish beach, are we moved, too late, to compassion. We too are slow learners and our Christian journey of learning can sometimes seem to be one step forward and two steps back.

Fortunately with God it is never too late. He is willing to forgive our many failures and help us to learn by them and grow through them. Think of Peter, reinstated by the risen Christ, after his three

denials, of Saul the persecutor of the early church commissioned to be the apostle to the Gentiles. Think of yourself, of your own relationship with Jesus, your own knowledge of his love. In spite of our many failures he asks us too if we love him and, knowing we do, even if our love is little and fearful, forgives us and reminds us he has given us a share in his work of loving, serving and forgiving others. There are other children he calls us to receive in his name, that they too might find life and love and hope in him. Yes, we are slow learners, yes, all too often we still get it wrong, but by the grace of God we are on our way. As the father of the dumb child whom Jesus healed so we can say, 'I believe, help my unbelief.'

So, vulnerable and trusting, loving God a little and wanting to love and serve Him more, let us come to the Lord's table once again this morning and receive more of his gifts as we take the bread and wine and feed on him in our hearts by faith with thanksgiving.