

God with us

St. Brandon's

Ephesians 3:14-21; John 6:1-21

29th July 2018

We have recently returned from a holiday in Ireland. As part of that we visited various places in the south west associated with St Brendan / St Brandon which I'll tell you all about ... some other time. But we began in Dublin and, in visiting St Patrick's Cathedral, we learnt of Jonathan Swift, the author of *Gulliver's Travels*, who had been Dean there from 1713 to 1745. Legend has it that the Cathedral's pulpit had wheels on it so that Swift could be pushed around the aisles to wake up sleeping parishioners during his sermons! (He even preached 'A sermon upon sleeping in Church!'). A lectern with wheels seems such a good idea that I'll be proposing a motion to that effect to the next PCC.

During our holiday I started reading a book by Samuel Wells entitled *A Nazareth Manifesto*, subtitled *Being with God*.¹ Now I know it's dangerous to borrow from a book that you've not yet finished, but I think the gist of it is clear and that it bears on today's readings. So I'd like to start by explaining a bit about the book's key theme.

Wells makes distinctions between working and being, and between for and with. This leads to four possibilities: Working for; working with; being for; being with. And his central contention is that it is the last of these, being with, that is God's fundamental disposition. In other words, "God's life is shaped never to be except to be with us" (p.140), and Christ's coming to earth (Emmanuel – God with us), is further and primary evidence of that. The reason the book is called *A Nazareth Manifesto* is that it points to the first 30 years of Jesus' life on earth, his time mostly in Nazareth, as being evidence of that primary mode of God which is simply to be with us. What God longs for, and the purpose of God, is nothing less but also nothing more than simply to be with us for ever.

Now I think that's perhaps a helpful way of understanding what St Paul is saying, in his usual complicated but inspiring language, in our NT reading. "I pray that, according to the riches of his glory, he may grant that you may be strengthened in your inner being with power through his Spirit, and that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith, as you are being rooted and grounded in love." This is all about God being with us, indeed being in us, and we being grounded in Him, so that God is in a loving relationship with us and for no other reason than to be with us. Paul continues: "I pray that you may have the power to comprehend, with all the saints, what is the breadth and length and height and depth [four dimensions], and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God." This is first about understanding and then using that understanding to be in an even deeper loving relationship with God in Christ, being filled with Christ, and again with no ulterior motive than simply to be with Him. That is the ultimate purpose of God towards us and should, therefore, be our ultimate purpose towards Him. And it therefore follows that this should also be our ultimate purpose with each other. Being with us as the purpose of God and our purpose towards God as being with Him, should be reflected in our other relationships including not just human relationships but with other creatures and indeed with the whole created order.

Now if that's the case, you may wonder why the book also uses working for, working with and being for as three other modes of relationship. And it's because these are other modes of relationship which are common, but that they are only truly valid if they lead to being with. In other words, being with, as we've seen, is the ultimate aim; the other three are, or should be, merely supportive in that. Now, let me try to

¹ Wiley, 2015.

make this rather less theoretical by applying it to our Gospel reading, and I'll say a little more about each of these modes of relationship as we go.

The first thing to notice is that Jesus' primary intention seems simply to be with His disciples. He tries to withdraw from the crowds who are following Him by going up a mountain, and when He gets there He simply "sat down there with his disciples". There is no other purpose in His mind, apparently, than to be with them. But then the crowds arrive, and their motivation seems to be primarily to do with the healing that Jesus is offering. They want Him to *work for* them; that seems to be their primary mode of relationship. And to some extent Jesus goes along with that, though He realises that their primary need at this point is for food rather than healing. But Jesus then goes into a different mode of relationship with His disciples and the boy with the five loaves and two fish. He could, presumably, just have fed the 5,000 Himself, but you notice how He *works with* the disciples and the boy, and *works for* the crowd. But the crowd, now realising what has happened, want to make Him king by force, in other words they want Jesus to *be for* and to continue to *work for* them. Their approach to a relationship with Jesus is, in other words, instrumental. "What can Jesus do for us next?" seems to be their question. And because Jesus' fundamental disposition is to want to *be with* people, rather than just to be for or to work for them, He withdraws to prevent their instrumental approach winning the day. But perhaps we can see from this how the four modes of relationship – working for, working with, being for, being with – inter-relate, how each has its place, but that they can be kept in good order only if being with is the ultimate aim.

Now, let's bring this up to date, and see how it might apply to us, by considering perhaps the equivalent of the feeding of the 5,000 in our day, that's to say foodbanks and the work of the Trussell Trust which is behind most of them. The Trussell Trust, as you may know, is a charity founded on Christian principles, which says in its mission statement that it "works with" (note the link) people of all faiths and none, inspired by Jesus' words in Matthew 25, "For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat ...".² It has over 400 foodbanks across the UK and in 2017/18 gave out 1,332,952 three-day emergency food supplies to people in crisis. Now before I look at their mode of operation more closely it's important to say both that the work it does is fantastic, feeding way more than 5,000 people every week, and that food poverty in the UK is a scandal that this government has got away with for far too long.

But having said that, how do the Trussell Trust and the foodbanks operate? Well, as we've seen, it says that it *works with* those in need. It calls them clients and it provides not only emergency food but also offers support and signposts to other charities and agencies which can help to resolve the underlying cause of the crisis – their words. It also conducts background research such as its 2017 report entitled 'Early warnings: Universal Credit and foodbanks'. That's all in line with its mission which is "Bringing communities together to end hunger and poverty in the UK by providing compassionate, practical help with dignity whilst challenging injustice".

But using the framework that Samuel Wells' book offers, we can see that while it says it "works with", in practice most of its activities seem to be "working for". It works for those in need. Now for those of us who might be in a position to help out by providing supplies, that may be all we can do – to work for those in need by putting stuff in the yellow bin at the back of Church. But, of course, that's a rather at-a-distance mode of relationship. Let me ask, does anyone here actually know anyone who has used a foodbank? And if so, is that a relationship that might then be characterised as working with or, even further, being with?

One of the points that Wells makes in his book is that being for or working for modes of relationship tend to cast 'them' in the role of the needy, those in crisis, people who need help, and 'us' as those who have the resources to do something about it. Whereas working with and, more particularly, being with start from

² See www.trusselltrust.org/

a recognition that we are all in this together. Perhaps that we have as much to learn from, to receive from 'them' as they from 'us'. That we are just as poor and in need, though perhaps not in a material sense, as they are. And working with and being with reflect an equality of relationship which seems to be what God in Christ models for us – that "God's life is shaped never to be except to be with us".

Now none of this is easy, either on a personal level in our own relationships with God both individually and collectively, or in our relationships with others, and particularly those who are in need. But perhaps having those distinctions between working and being, and between for and with, more clearly in our heads, and appreciating that God's desired mode of relationship is simply to be with us, as it is to be with all people, might help to both challenge and guide us in our lives. And St Paul's final words in our NT passage seem in a way to both summarise all of that and provide a suitable closing prayer:

"Now to him who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than we can ask or imagine, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, for ever and ever. Amen."