

The Christian difference : Easter 6

Acts 17:22-31; Psalm. 66:7-19; 1 Peter 3:8-22; John 14:15-21

I want to begin by reading an extract from Karen Blixen's book *Out of Africa*.

There was a young Kikuyu by the name of Kitau, who came in from the Kikuyu reserve and took service with me. He was a meditative boy, an observant, attentive servant and I liked him well. After three months he one day asked me to give him a letter of recommendation to my old friend Sheik Ali bin Salim, the Lewali of the coast at Mombasa, for he had seen him in my house and now, he said, he wished to go and work for him. I did not want Kitau to leave just when he had learned the routine of the house, and I said to him that I would rather raise his pay. No. he said, he was not leaving to get any higher pay, but he could not stay. He told me that he had made up his mind, up in the reserve, that he would become either a Christian or a Mohammedan, only he did not yet know which. For this reason he had come and worked for me, since I was a Christian, and he had stayed for three months in my house to see the testurde – the ways and habits – of the Christians. From me he would go for three months to Sheik Ali in Mombasa and study the testurde of the Mohammedans; then he would decide.

The author concludes rather ruefully:

I believe that even an archbishop, when he had had these facts laid before him, would have said, or at least have thought, as I said: 'Good God, Kitau, you might have told me that when you came here.'¹

The truth is that the Christian life should be different. That is one of the themes that come through in the Scripture readings for this Sunday morning. A Christian life is not just "doing the right thing" or "behaving oneself" (though I sincerely hope we are doing that too).

The Christian life is so much more than this. The Christian life is nothing less than living in Christ and having Christ live in us. It is consciously living in the very presence of God.

Now, we do not live our Christian lives in the belief that the more virtuous we are the greater will be our chances of a heavenly reward. We know that no matter how much we strive in our own strength, we remain fallible human beings, sinful and failing despite our best endeavours. However, we also know that it is Christ who has rescued us from our frail and helpless human

¹ Blixen, Karen. *Out of Africa*. London, Folio Society, 1980. p. 52

condition, and that He is the one who pleads for us and guarantees our salvation. It is in gratitude and thanksgiving for this inestimable gift of freely-given grace that we seek to live worthy and godly lives.

The great piece of good news from our gospel reading this morning is that we are not alone, but we have a helper and guide.

Jesus tells His fearful and grief-stricken disciples that He is going away, but that He would not leave them as orphans. (John 14:18). He promises them that someone will come to be with them. He even adds (John 16:7) that it is to their advantage that He goes because that someone who is coming is going to help and guide them lovingly and powerfully. That someone will be with them always (John 14:16).

At times, I have been in homes where the presence of a guest has made a difference. Sometimes through the impact of their loving, joyful personality, or at other times through their quietness, calmness and serenity, they have completely transformed the atmosphere of the house.

In the same way, only much more powerfully, the presence of the Holy Spirit in a person's life imparts joy, love, comfort and mercy. The Holy Spirit transforms us, and teaches us to live in Christ, and not in our circumstances.

Jesus also mentions that the world does not know the Holy Spirit, and so not surprisingly this is not at all the way that most people live their lives. Some of the qualities instilled by the Holy Spirit are deeply counter cultural to our own society and times.

The passage from 1 Peter chapter 3 is a blueprint for lives lived under the leading of the Holy Spirit. Let me re-read some of it. The translation is slightly different from the one we have just heard.

To sum up, all of you be harmonious, sympathetic, brotherly, kind-hearted and humble in spirit; not returning evil for evil or insult for insult, but giving a blessing instead, for you were called for the very purpose that you might inherit a blessing. ... sanctify Christ as Lord in your hearts, always being ready to make a defense to everyone who asks you to give an account for the hope that is in you, yet with gentleness and reverence;

The Holy Spirit says that unity is essential, that we are to live together harmoniously. The world thrives on division and factionalism.

The Holy Spirit gives the precious gift of sympathy, the ability to rejoice with those who rejoice, and weep with those who weep. The world's norm is

selfishness, jealousy and envy against those who seem to have more. What sympathy the world has, is too often measured out carefully only to the deserving, and is subject to rapid compassion fatigue.

The Holy Spirit engenders love. Love casts out fear. Love does not abandon. Love is eager to do good. Love provides a place. Through love we find, and are found, by God. In opposition the world presents indifference.

The Holy Spirit enables us to cultivate a humble, teachable mind, aware of our dependence on God, and obedient to His leading. The world is horrified at this so-called loss of independence, and loudly trumpets its insistence on its own opinions and ways.

The Holy Spirit teaches us to repay with a blessing, to forgive others as God has forgiven us. Revenge, quarrelling, grudge bearing, gossip and a spirit quick to take offense are what the world often prefers.

As we live under the instruction and guiding of the Holy Spirit, we gradually learn to recognise many of those behaviours which belong to the world and not to the realm of the Spirit. However small, however seemingly insignificant and harmless they may appear, we need to identify them and bring them out into the light of the Spirit. We must banish them from our lives, and if necessary come before God in repentance.

This is not always easy or comfortable. At least I find this in my own life. But the Holy Spirit is our teacher and there is none better. He enables us to see sin clearly, and to have a right attitude towards it. If it is in our own lives, He enables us to deal with it.

Should someone be watching us, as Kitau was watching and observing in the extract that I read, would they see any difference in our lives?

I hope they would not smile rather knowingly and turn away, reassured to see that our lives are, after all, not so very different from those around us.

I hope they would see something that might make them pause and take stock. Something that might make them stand in awe at God's holiness. Something that might move them to love and worship and desire to know more.

I hope that they would see lives lived very differently from those round about us, yet lives which are strangely attractive and compelling, perhaps with values and standards which have been lost elsewhere, but which have an honoured place among God's people.

I hope they would see a Christian difference.

Let us pray:

Holy God, Holy Spirit,

You always seek our good, and ever gift our lives:

come to us now, remind us of Jesus' way

and call us to love.

Empower us by Your presence,

shape us as individuals and communities,

that our lives may indeed reflect our love for you. Amen.