

The 2010 Patronal Festival Sermon

Preacher: The Rt Revd John Pritchard, Bishop of Oxford

“Turn from these worthless things to the living God”

When Paul and Barnabas came to Lystra the crowds shouted, 'The gods have come down to us in human form.' Strangely that's never happened to me! Of course it helped that Paul had just healed a man crippled from birth, and my arrival in Oxford was a little less dramatic. Mind you, I wasn't taken in by something written by a predecessor of mine in the 1830s who said, 'I took this diocese solely because of its smallness, quietness and the little anxiety it need give me.' That's not how I'd describe the diocese of Oxford today!

Indeed another predecessor, Bp Patrick Rodger, was once standing in the loo in our Diocesan Church House (like you do) and he said to the man standing beside him, 'You know, I think this is the only time in my life when I really know what I'm doing, and when I stand a pretty good chance of finishing the job!' I know what he meant! Ministry is complicated, the social context is bewildering, public understanding of what we're about is at an all time low. And yet... all is well. Because God is well.

Paul and Barnabas came to Lystra with a clear goal – to proclaim Jesus Christ as Lord. Unfortunately, having to stop and heal someone led to that bit of misunderstanding I mentioned before – they were mistaken for the two deities worshipped locally, Zeus and Hermes. Only 50 years before, the poet Ovid had told the story in his *Metamorphoses* of these two gods visiting the country nearby, disguised as mortal men, and being rejected time and again as they looked for somewhere to stay – until an old peasant couple took them in. This couple eventually got rewarded, but all the other homes got destroyed by the gods. Not unnaturally, the locals were now rather keen not to repeat that mistake, so they went out of their way to welcome these two men with god-like powers.

And Paul and Barnabas, when they realise what's going on, are appalled. 'Friends, why are you doing this? We are mortals just like you, and we bring you good news, that you should turn from these worthless things to the living God, who made the heaven and the earth, the sea and all that's in them.' Yes indeed. That's what we here have been trying to say all our lives and ministries, isn't it? 'Turn from these worthless things to the living God.'

'These worthless things.' What are those? Chief Rabbi Jonathan Sacks wrote about our recession like this: 'Oscar Wilde was right when he defined a cynic as one who knows the price of everything and the value of nothing. The richer Britain became the more cynical it grew. It put its faith in a financial house of cards. It looked at house prices and thought itself rich. It created the religion of shopping, whose 'original sin' was *not having this year's must-have*, and whose salvation lay in spending money you don't *have*, to buy things you don't *need*, for the sake of a happiness that doesn't *last*.'

'These worthless things.' We seem to have got the price labels all mixed up. The worthless things like glamour, celebrity, and ruthlessness are given hugely inflated price tags; the truly valuable things like love, courage, mercy and so on, are put in the corner marked 'reduced to clear'. Now, I shall be as plugged in to the World Cup as anyone, but I can't help but be flabbergasted by the thought of Steven Gerrard being paid £125,000 a week just to play a game. A week! Do you remember your last monthly pay cheque from the Church Commissioners? Football has gone crazy.

I used to know the England captain of the 1960s, Jimmy Armfield, and he never got more than £70 a week from his club even when he was captaining England. But now we've got the price tags all mixed up.

'The worthless things'. All this confusion over what's valuable has led to anarchy over what's wise, as we try to live together in society. Charles Saatchi, the advertising guru, has written a book recently in which he offers his opinions on various questions, and he gives this evaluation of the Ten Commandments: 'It's an overrated lifestyle guide, unsustainable and largely ineffective, only succeeding in making people confused and guilty.' When asked about which of the seven deadly sins he is guilty of he replies: 'All of them. And they're far from being sins. Rather, they're all very uplifting and create a balanced and engaged life.' I think Paul would say, as he did in 2 Cor.4, 'The god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelievers.' Charles Saatchi is in a very bad place.

Paul and Barnabas said, 'We bring you good news, that you should turn from these worthless things to the living God who made the heaven and the earth...' That's so deeply refreshing, isn't it? 'Turn to the living God.' Set your compass on the true and living God, and then you'll be able to read off north, south, east and west; you'll be aligned with reality; you'll know the true value of things; you'll know what your life is for.

It's interesting though, isn't it, that Paul and Barnabas (we don't know which of them was speaking; probably Paul) – Paul says that their hearers should turn to the living God, maker of heaven and earth, seen in the rain, and the fruitful seasons, and filling their stomachs with food and their hearts with joy. Paul doesn't speak immediately of Jesus; he starts where they are, people without the benefit of the Hebrew scriptures which he would use as his starting point elsewhere. But here he starts with the natural world around them. That too witnesses to God's kindness, he says. There's the book of scripture and the book of nature.

It was five in the morning and the night had been bitterly cold. But then, at Annapurna base camp in the Himalayas, what could one expect? I'd slept in several layers of clothing in a four seasons sleeping bag with only my nose poking out, but I was still cold and glad to get moving. Dawn was casting a calm light into our wooden hut. I struggled into yet more clothes and icy boots, and then went outside.

It was only a hundred yards up the slope to the moraine we hadn't been able to see the night before when we arrived in the steady snowfall, but I knew this was the vantage point we needed. When I got there I looked up and if I hadn't already been silent in the early dawn I would have been struck dumb. Around me were at least ten peaks which stood over 20,000 feet high. The distances were disconcerting but these giant sentinels stood guard all around us – not for nothing is it called the Annapurna Sanctuary. The peaks glowed pink in the dawn light and their massive silence was overwhelming. Above all I was awestruck by the scale of these majestic mountains. My idea of a mountain was shaped by the Lake District peaks where Scafell Pike is the highest at just 3209 feet. These around Annapurna were off the scale.

My companion and I were speechless. We looked and looked. We drank in the beauty. And in the profound silence I gave thanks to the Creator. How could I not? 'Awesome' is a distressingly overused word nowadays, but it was for this that the word was intended. I think that for many people today an approach to the divine is made most easily through the natural world. I might like to think that being introduced to the person of Jesus would bring people to their knees, but experience suggests that, in our highly secularised culture, a walk on the hills or digging in a garden is, for many people, a surer guide to the geography of God. This is where Elizabeth Barrett Browning's words ring true for many people: 'Earth's crammed with heaven, and every common

bush afire with God, but only he who sees, takes off his shoes.' Paul and Barnabas were saying, 'Take off your shoes.'

Paul was flexible in his style of preaching and his way of talking about the gospel. Would that we had that same gracefulness. So often different parts of the Church have wrapped the gospel up in little boxes with plain or multi-coloured paper, according to taste, and told the rest of the world that this is the take-it-or-leave-it true gospel, never to be contaminated by the world. 'You mean, like Jesus?' I want to ask.' The Jesus who got his hands dirty in the soil of creation and the soil of people's lives.

And it's to this Jesus that Paul and Barnabas would have pointed people eventually, if they'd had the chance. Unfortunately, Jewish protesters came from Antioch and Iconium and chased them out of town. They went on to Derbe, but then, astonishingly after the way they'd been treated, they just went straight back in to Lystra and proclaimed the good news of Jesus Christ and, we're told, made many disciples. What a couple!

'Turn from these worthless things to the living God.' It's the turn that matters. We live in such a proud age that people don't want to turn. I have a cartoon of a man pushing a loaded supermarket trolley up a mountain path, followed by a disconsolate wife. The caption said, 'Having insisted this was the way back to the car, Paul is unable to admit that he is wrong.' That's today's story. The gospel says, turn, turn, turn; all the joy of God awaits you.

And we know – gosh, as those who've tried all our lives – we know how much this 'turning' is a daily decision, a daily question put to us by a loving Lord. I once sponsored a man for ordination and asked him to write about his Christian journey. He said: 'If being a Christian means giving your assent to the basic tenets of the Christian faith, then I became a Christian at the tender age of six. If it means having received the forgiveness of sins through Jesus Christ and his death and resurrection, then I was converted at age twelve. If it means being baptised and giving a public confession of faith, then I received the gift of grace at age fourteen. If being a Christian means trusting God to guide you through life, then I was twenty before I had faith at all. If it means being confirmed and receiving the blessing and the laying on of hands from an ordained bishop, then I saw the light a year and a half ago in the cathedral. This may sound flippant, but the point I want to make is this: I started my journey of faith in Sunday School before my fourth birthday, and yet now, at the mature age of forty, I still need to turn to Christ every day as if it was for the first time.'

Here was a man who understood the complex simplicity of faith and who knew, for all his intellectual ability, that at its heart faith is a matter of turning afresh to Christ every day and seeking to put him at the centre. That's what I trust we will all do, to the end of our days.

'Turn from these worthless things to the living God who made the heaven and the earth.'