

3 September 2016: St Gregory the Great  
British Anglican Cursillo National Ultreya

Jeremiah 1.4-10; 1 Corinthians 1.18-25; Matthew 5.13-19

Again, welcome to York, and welcome to the mother church of the North of England. *De colores!* I hope that you are enjoying yourselves at your National Ultreya. It's affirming for you to be together, and especially perhaps if cursillistas are a bit thin on the ground where you are, it's encouraging to know that there are people elsewhere you are doing something similar to what you do, and whose experiences are like your own. I'm very grateful to Shelagh for asking the Dean to invite me to speak this morning, and to Trevor for sight of your programme. It looks as if you have got a good mixture of work and fun. Whether the item on tonight's programme '7pm Dancing commences' fills you with joyful anticipation or trepidation, it's going to be quite a party.

But what do you bring to the bigger party, the church's party, God's party?

Let's look at today's Bible readings to help our thinking. Jeremiah experiences his call from God. The language is very personal, 'the word of the Lord came to *me*.' When God calls him to be a prophet, a person who brings God's perspective on the religious and social and political situation of his time, Jeremiah's reaction is to think of his own inadequacy. 'I don't know how to speak, and anyway I'm just a youngster.' But God's plan is to make Jeremiah his mouthpiece, not for blandness because sometimes he will bring a hard message and his task will be 'to destroy and to overthrow'. But God will be with him and will not abandon him.

Then we heard part of the opening chapter of Paul's first letter to the Corinthians. Whenever I read those letters to the young church in Corinth, I feel the intensity of Paul's love and care towards them, but also hints of the huge frustration they must have caused him. They split into groups and they squabble and they behave badly. But Paul knows that they are the living treasury of the good news of Jesus. It's as if Paul is grabbing them warmly by the lapels (OK, they didn't have jackets with lapels, but you get the picture) saying 'Don't you realise how wonderful and how world-changing all of this is? But if you are going to begin to realise that, you have to think in a radically different way. Yes, dear Corinthians, those of you from a Jewish background may expect God is going to prove his power by doing something supernatural. If you're from a non-Jewish background you may want to sort religion out with a dose of logic. What have we got to show? A beaten-up naked man shamefully nailed to some planks. But that's where you'll find power and wisdom, the real stuff that comes from a loving God: the self-giving, self-emptying anointed one who gives himself up to death for the sake of those he loves.' 'God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God's weakness is stronger than human strength.' Fourteen chapters later Paul will put the other pillar of his argument in place: 'If for this life only we have hoped in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied. But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead ... he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet. The last enemy to be destroyed is death. Therefore, my beloved, be steadfast, immovable, always excelling in the work of the Lord, because you know that in the Lord your labour is not in vain.'<sup>1</sup>

And then the Gospel reading. Matthew pictures Jesus on a mountain in the presence of crowds, speaking particularly to his disciples about God: Jesus as a second Moses, we might say, not bringing a replacement law but with a re-telling, a re-focusing, of what it

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<sup>1</sup> 1 Corinthians 15.19-20, 25-26, 58

means to be in relationship with God. But for the disciples, having this relationship isn't for their own advantage. Rather, they are to see themselves as tasty salt, eye-catching light: the way that they are with God is to be for the benefit of anyone and everyone else. They are to be what Gregory would call himself, 'servants of the servants of God'.

So our readings are encouraging us to think about what it means to be caught up in what God intends for us, and not just what we think we can do — but God may have some hard work in store; about being swept along by the discovery of how God really works and how that doesn't conform to human and cultural expectations; about the relationship with God that Jesus's learners have being a gift to others.

You share the experience of being on Cursillo weekends. There's still the strong echo in the weekends of the spiritual revival movement 80 years ago when Cursillo started. Eduardo Bonnin saw how the circumstances of the time, the Spanish Civil War, had had the effect of people's religious mindset lacking depth, understanding and real commitment. In the classic mould of spiritual reformers — St Gregory the Great whose feast day it is today, the Wesleys, name whom you will — Bonnin wanted to see people's whole life being transformed through a discovery, and a daily re-discovery, of the wonder of the love of God in Jesus Christ. I know from being with some of you at the end of your weekends that although at one level there is little that is different from other gatherings for prayer and worship, nevertheless there is a special 'something' and there is a great intensity of experience that many cursillistas feel, and a sense of having been on a very powerful journey in those short days. And to go on that journey means having the courage to ask the question we so often run from, 'How am I with God?'; and being open to God making of you what he intends. And you have all realised, I know, that the journey of a weekend is a step on a longer, never-ending pilgrimage.

So what can you bring to the bigger party? How can you, individually and together in Cursillo, be an influence for good at whatever level within the church, and what can be your distinctive colours in the whole mission and work to which God invites us?

- First of all, please bring celebration and joy, with worship and prayer at the heart, because without worship and prayer we don't deserve the name of church anyway. In the spirit of Jeremiah, please bring your conviction that the church is only what it is because of God's Spirit working through us, and tell your story of how you have seen unexpected gifts of God flourish in yourselves and in the people you have been blessed to meet.
- Be the advertisement for what it means to be a rational 21st-century adult, belonging to whatever part of the church you do, with whatever style of weekly worship and using whatever kind of faith language is appropriate for you, but a person whose deepest being has been transformed and is constantly being changed by an encounter with God in Christ.
- Show and share how vital it has been for you to take steps on a long pilgrimage irrespective of age, and if the reality is that the pilgrimage has been hard at times, you'll be a better advocate for it if you're not afraid of saying so.
- Outside the safety of church culture, counter the idea that faith is redundant, as others see in you what Paul wanted the Corinthians to be, people who know that true wisdom and power are to be found on the cross and in the emptiness of the tomb.

- And let Cursillo be not only your own closer walk with God, but your way to be salt and light as Jesus taught his disciples to be, so that others can be drawn to the reality of God and his love.

Gregory could have been a true cursillista 13 centuries in advance when he wrote 'I do not stand on the pinnacle of achievement ... the creator and redeemer of humankind can give me, unworthy though I be, the grace to see life whole and power to speak effectively of it.'<sup>2</sup> To that I hope we can all add our Amen. Have a wonderful day.

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<sup>2</sup> From a sermon on Ezekiel