

An appointment with Jesus

Genesis 9.8-17; I Cor 13.1-13 and Luke 18.31-43

Confirmation at St Barnabas, Oxford

26th February

Thank you very much for your welcome. It is very good to be at St Barnabas for the first time as Bishop of Oxford. This is not our first visit here. Ann and I were remembering yesterday that we last came to St Barnabas together when our banns of marriage were called almost 40 years ago when we were a bachelor and spinster of this parish. Thank you for your prayers for us as an unknown engaged couple all those years ago, which we believe have been answered.

There are two different ways of meeting people: by chance and by appointment. In some communities, in villages, schools and colleges, most meetings happen by chance. In others, which are larger and more complex, meetings are best arranged by appointment: we take out our diaries, look through them and agree to meet. Both kinds of meeting are very good.

There are two different ways of meeting God: by chance, as it were, and by appointment. Again, both kinds are good.

Bartimaeus, the blind man, meets Jesus, as it were, by chance. This seems from his perspective a random encounter. He is in his normal place by the roadside begging. Jesus has come to Jericho, his town. He hears a commotion, he asks what is happening. "Jesus of Nazareth is passing by".

Bartimaeus shouts out: "Jesus son of David, have mercy on me". His words have formed one of the most famous prayers of all time, the Jesus prayer. The crowd try and silence him but he persists. Jesus asks to see him. Bartimaeus is brought forward. There is a powerful encounter. "What do you want me to do for you?" says Jesus. "Lord let me see again". His life is changed. From a chance encounter comes a divine appointment.

Bartimaeus was not seeking to meet Jesus that day but, we believe, Jesus still was seeking him. Jesus of Nazareth is passing by.

There are moments in every life of this kind of random, unexpected encounter with God, for those who are Christians and those who are not. For those who are Christians, God will be there in places we do not expect: in a quiet walk, a sunset, a child's smile, a song on the radio, a friend's greeting, a moment of compassion.

I met a Syrian refugee family this week in High Wycombe. As I listened to an eleven year Muslim old girl talk about her life in war torn Damascus and I saw the way she had been helped to settle safely in Britain by Christians and Muslims together, God was present for me in that moment.

In the words of the poet, Gerard Manley Hopkins: "I greet him the days that I meet him and bless when I understand". The world is full of wonder and the presence of God and from time to time our eyes are opened and we notice.

For those who are not Christians also, there are many times when God draws near: in the beauty of the world, in our nagging questions, in our longing for something deeper, in our conscience, like a familiar voice calling from far away, in times of great need. God's love seeks us out. We hear a distant and familiar knocking, an invitation, a call.

It is a profound thing to meet with God in what seems to be a random encounter and recognise God's love in our lives.

But there are also many moments in the gospels and in our lives where we meet Jesus, as it were, by appointment. In the very next passage in the gospels, Jesus makes an appointment with Zaccheus to come and stay at his house. Zaccheus' life is changed in that appointment.

All through the gospels, Jesus makes it clear that he makes appointments and times and places for us to meet with God.

When we go into our room and close the door and set aside time for solitary prayer, God meets us. Wherever two or three are gathered in my name, he says, I am there in the midst of them. Whenever we come to this Holy Eucharist, and gather round the table of the Lord, and receive the body and blood of Jesus in Holy Communion, we have an appointment to meet with God.

In all of those moments our faith is rekindled, our hearts are made new, our minds are restored, our hope is enlivened, our lives are reset to their true direction.

This confirmation service this morning is such a moment of divine appointment for these candidates. After careful thought and preparation, each of them will make for themselves the promises made for them at their baptism. And we will pray that God will fill them with his Holy Spirit and make them strong this day and every day for the rest of their lives.

God loves us and calls us and invites us to meet with him often in prayer and sacrament, in scripture and fellowship.

So let me ask you this as we approach Lent together. Let me ask you this whether you are a Christian or not. Whether you are a candidate. Whether you have been a Christian for many years. Whether you are lay or ordained.

What appointments have you made with God for this season of Lent? What time have you set aside for quiet prayer and reflection? What time have you set aside for scripture and reading and deepening your faith? What time have you set aside to gather at the table of the Lord? For the fellowship and the prayers?

Jesus of Nazareth is passing by, they said to Bartimaeus. And we will meet him often in the course of our lives, if our eyes are open. But Jesus also longs to meet us in the quiet place of prayer, at the communion rail, in scripture and in fellowship.

I say to the candidates, to all of us and to myself:

Do not leave your encounters with God only to chance and for that season when you will have more time. It will never arrive.

Begin today. Make fresh appointments with God in this season. There is no waiting list, or queue. There is no helpline you have to call with seven numbers to press before you speak to a real person. Come before Jesus as they brought Bartimaeus to him through the crowd. Begin with his prayer: Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me. And hear his word to you: What do you want me to do for you?

Make an appointment with God in this season. Amen.