

Clare College Chapel, 12 Feb 2012

## Jesus at the Centre

I chose our reading from Isaiah because one verse in that passage is a favourite of mine – v 15 –

For thus says the high and lofty one  
 who inhabits eternity, whose name is Holy:  
 I dwell in the high and holy place,  
 and also with those who are contrite and humble in spirit,  
 to revive the spirit of the humble,  
 and to revive the heart of the contrite.

The Bible often uses the imagery of height to express the transcendence of God – that God surpasses his creation infinitely, that he is so to speak over and above the world. It pictures God as unimaginably high above the heavens: the high and lofty one who dwells in the high and holy place. But in the Bible it is no contradiction to say that this God also dwells with those who are contrite and humble in spirit. That translation is not entirely helpful. The words mean something more like: people who are inwardly crushed and dragged down by the troubles of life. They're at the end of their resources. They're the people Jesus called poor in spirit. And God promises to put new life into them – by dwelling with them. The high and lofty one comes down, as it were, from his exalted place in order to dwell with these very needy people. That little word *with* is a potent one when the Bible says, as it often does, that God is *with* someone. God comes into our lives, not in some dominating, authoritarian way, but coming alongside us. Like Jesus with the disciples on their Easter Day walk to Emmaus, we may not at first be aware of his presence. He comes alongside us as friends do. For those who realise they cannot cope with life out of their own resources he is the presence with them that they need, raising up the crushed, inspiring new life in the dispirited. God becomes the presence that sustains our whole life when we open our lives to his presence.

That verse in Isaiah seems to me to be one of the places where the Old Testament comes closest to the good news of the New Testament: that Jesus is God dwelling among us, God with us. Our reading from Philippians tells the story of the divine Son of God who did not think his exalted position in the high and holy place was an opportunity to exploit for his own advantage, but (quite the opposite) understood that to be God was to give himself for others, to disregard his own interests, to suffer humiliation and degradation by dying as a despised criminal, sharing the human plight at its most extreme. This was the way that in love he came alongside those who need his presence. By enduring the worst with them and for them he also entered their lives in every human situation short of the worst. He became the loving presence that transforms and brings new life to those who see how much they need it.

Jesus is God's presence with us. God incarnate. Christian faith makes that rather remarkable claim that puts Jesus right at the centre of all human life and God's

purpose for the world. It doesn't mean of course that God is not present in many others in the world and in human history. But this is a unique form of God's presence. In the incarnation God is present *as* the man Jesus. For Christian faith Jesus becomes part of the very definition of God. In the Creeds, where Christians say who the God we believe in is, we do two things. We say that God is Trinity: we believe in God the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. And we tell the story of Jesus, because that is the principal key to who God is and what God is doing in the world. The story of Jesus – of course, it's a summary of all the stories the Gospels tell about Jesus – the Gospel story of Jesus places Jesus at the centre and invites us all to find the centre of our own lives in that story. It's an unfinished story, a story we can join, and joining the story of Jesus leads us to the centre of reality where God is most truly to be found.

But is this not a rather extraordinary and incredible claim? That one man should have this unique significance for all human life? It certainly seemed unlikely when the early Christians spread their message – that a Jewish teacher, who never left Palestine and ended up crucified, could be lord and saviour of the world. But let's look more closely at the way in which Jesus attained such a position. It was not of course by seizing power and putting himself in a position of dominance. Not, in that sense, at all like one of the great men of history. Much admired in Jesus' time was Alexander the Great, who at lightning speed conquered most of the known world in a constantly restless quest for new lands to conquer. It was the greatest empire there had ever been and seemed a virtually miraculous achievement. It was natural enough that he claimed divinity and many people were willing enough to see him as a god.

Like Jesus, Alexander died young, but their lives have little else in common. Jesus resolutely resisted any temptation to take the road to empire. He related to people not by power of arms or dominance but by love. We know him not from stories of great battles or meetings with famous people, but from all those little stories in the Gospels of Jesus' encounters with all sorts of people, almost all of them people of whom we would certainly never had heard if Jesus had not transformed their lives. They are not the sort of people who make it into the pages of ancient history. What seems to me to come through those stories is that Jesus made a difference by the quality of caring attention he gave to everyone, the kind of love that enters empathetically into another person's situation and recognizes their need. It's the kind of love in which one goes out of oneself in order to prioritize the other. And that's the sort of love that led Jesus to the extremity of the human plight, where in dying he was still able to attend lovingly to the man dying on the cross beside him.

Jesus is the man who – again in the words of our reading from Philippians – emptied himself, set self-interest entirely aside, and lived wholly for God and for other people. Paradoxically it is because he did not make himself his own centre, because he did not build an empire for himself but lived for others, suffered and died for others – this enabled him to be the centre from which the love of God radiated into all sorts of people's lives. And, with his resurrection, that goes on. Alexander the Great, though still a fascinating figure of history, no longer seems

relevant to many people's lives. People have never stopped finding Jesus the centre from which they can most meaningfully live their lives.

In that wonderful verse of Isaiah, the high and holy God dwells also on earth with the crushed people, the weighed-down people, the poor in spirit. And of course many of the Gospel stories show Jesus bringing the transforming power of God's love into the lives of just such people. But let's not forget that he also challenged people to costly discipleship. He urged people to find meaning in their lives by joining his mission, serving others in his name. In that way too he proves to be at the centre. As followers of Jesus, people learn to de-centre themselves as he did, displacing the self from the centre, finding the centre of their lives outside themselves in Jesus. To be centred on Jesus is to be centred on God whose presence with us he is. And to be centred on Jesus is also to prioritize other people as he did, to become part of his mission to actualize God's love in the lives of the so many love-starved people in our world.