

‘Levelling the ground’

Mark 1:1-8

I have not been able to discover whether knowing the words of our National Anthem is a prerequisite for someone who wishes to gain British nationality – probably not. And that, I suspect, is a good thing: for how many people born and bred in this country know all the words?

I suspect most people are familiar with the first three lines: “God save our gracious Queen, long live our noble Queen, God save the Queen”, and a rather smaller number might even be able to go on to the end of the verse. But I guess at least 90% of folk would be flummoxed if you asked them the words of the second verse which starts “Thy gracious gifts in store, on her be pleased to pour, long may she reign”. And hardly anyone would be able to recite you the words of verses 3,4 or 5, even though they contain some excellent sentiments such as: “Confound their politics, frustrate their knavish tricks”, “From every latent foe, from the assassins blow, God save the Queen!” and the admirable “Lord make the nations see, that men should brothers be, and form one family, the wide world o’er”. Perhaps we should be grateful that we don’t have to sing these verses –our legs would get tired if we had to stand for so long!

But it is when you get to the final verse that controversy really boils over. For this is a verse that would probably get you clapped in irons (or at least sent back south of the border) if you ever dared sing it in the new Scottish Parliament or at Murrayfield rugby stadium. For it says, “Lord, grant that Marshal Wade may, by thy mighty aid, victory bring. May he sedition hush, and like a torrent rush, rebellious Scots to crush. God save the Queen!” No sign of loving brotherhood among the nations there: one is very much aware that our National Anthem is not only firmly rooted in English culture, but that it was specifically composed at the time of the Jacobite Rebellion of 1745. You can see why the Scots prefer “Flower of Scotland” or “Scotland the Brave”, can’t you!

There is a bit of a mystery in that verse, isn’t there? For who on earth was this “Marshal Wade” whose aim was to crush the Scots? Well, many of the Scots in the congregation will know the answer: George Wade was a soldier. He had a glittering military career which included fighting in Flanders and Spain, he was active in counter-terrorism in London and even ended up arresting the Swedish Ambassador, and he ended up as MP for Bath. Most important, in 1724 General Wade was appointed as Commander-in-Chief, North Britain, with a remit to “inspect the present situation of the Highlanders” and to “make strict inquiry into the last law for disarming the Highlanders”. To achieve his aim, General Wade recommended the building of barracks, forts and roads, which is why we have places today such as Fort William and Fort Augustus.

But it is for his roads that Wade is best remembered today. Between 1725 and 1737 he oversaw the construction of some 250 miles of road, plus 40 bridges, including his most striking legacy, the bridge over the River Tay at Aberfeldy, built at a cost of over £4000. Roads linking Perth, Inverness, Stirling, Fort William and the Great Glen rapidly appeared where previously there had only been tracks suitable for single-file passage of men or horses. When Wade left the Highlands, Major William Caulfield continued building military roads. This was a remarkable engineering programme for its day: nothing had been seen like it since Roman times. And one mustn’t forget that these roads – which still form the backbone of the present network – were constructed by human power alone, in the most difficult and remote territory. Truly the mountains had been brought low and the rough places made plain.

I have no idea what roads were like in Isaiah’s day. There certainly were well-used trade routes and merchants travelled long distances around the Near East, but these highways are hardly likely to have been metalled or engineered in any significant way. By the time John the Baptist appeared things were presumably very different: the Romans had been in occupation for over 50 years and they must have built roads, just like General Wade, to facilitate the rapid movement of troops. And, as we all know, Roman roads were well-constructed and tend to take as direct a course as possible. John would have certainly known what it meant to build a highway fit for a king - or even an emperor.

In Mark's gospel, John the Baptist appears right at the start. Unlike Matthew and Luke, there is no story of Jesus' birth; unlike John, there is no theological prologue. Mark wants to get a move on and tell us the story of Jesus who he is keen to present as the Son of God. And so, right at once, he presents us with this extraordinary figure of the Baptist, explicitly linking him to Isaiah's prophecy of six centuries before, smoothing the path for the Messiah. In present-day parlance, John was not so much building a road for the king to walk along as rolling out the red carpet in readiness for his imminent arrival.

So what, precisely, did John do? The answer is clear: he preached good news about someone - the Messiah - whose coming was just round the corner. Mark does exaggerates the story just a little: the Jordan Valley is by no means a wilderness and John's message cannot have attracted the crowds he describes, for the Romans would surely have taken fright and made sure they stopped gathering. Nevertheless, John is well aware of Jewish history and mythology and is consciously taking upon himself the mantle of the Old Testament prophet Elijah - another forthright character - who, many Jews believed, would reappear shortly before the Messiah himself. John was not drawing attention to himself; far from it. He was simply the warm-up artist preparing the crowds for the main event. But his ministry was vital if Jesus himself was to get a hearing.

I think it is quite interesting to reflect on the fact that, although many people in Palestine at time were looking for a Messiah, Jesus turned out to be very different to their expectations. The sort of saviour they were anticipating was, if not God himself, at least a mighty warrior who would deliver them from Roman tyranny. That sort of Messiah would have been very easy to spot a mile off, you could not have confused him with anyone else! But when Jesus appeared - the carpenter from Nazareth for goodness' sake! - he was much harder to spot and certainly didn't fit the mould. And so John's ministry was absolutely to tell people, "This is the one". Without his kick-start, Jesus would possibly have never emerged from obscurity. His work would have been smothered by people's inaccurate beliefs before it had ever started.

This makes me wonder how we can replicate John's ministry today: how we can prepare the way for Jesus' coming to Britain at Christmas 2008. For make no mistake: most people have got a highly inaccurate picture of who Jesus is; they fail to recognise him properly and, if they welcome him at all, they do so for all the wrong reasons. For, even if you strip away the confusion that seems to exist between Jesus and St. Nicholas and Father Christmas; even if you tell people that Jesus was not born in a snowbound stable in Lapland (or a mudbound one in the New Forest!); and even if you manage to persuade them that we are talking about a genuine historical event rather than a myth, you are still left with a problem, which is this: the baby of Bethlehem never grows up or, if he does, he simply becomes a nice person, cheerily doing good to all.

Let me go into a bit more detail. For what I am saying is this: the vast majority of people outside the Church today have no real idea of who Jesus is, not even half-remembered stories from their childhood. They have virtually no knowledge of the Gospel story (although they might just remember that Jesus turned water into wine, walked on the water, or fed the five thousand). They know nothing at all of Jesus' teaching except, "Do to others as you would want people to do to you". They are ignorant of his message of salvation, calling people to repentance and faith. And, even if they vaguely know the story of Easter, they fail to link it to Christmas or have any idea of what it means. The days when we could assume that most folk have a basic acquaintance of Christianity has long gone. We are left with ignorance, superstition and fairy-tale.

All that means that, if we are to carry out Jesus' mission of preaching good news to the world, we can neither expect people to welcome it nor understand it. If we want to do evangelism - and that word simply means "proclaiming good news" - then we cannot simply stick a few posters outside the church announcing special meetings and expect people to come in. Christianity is so far off the majority of people's radar that we would simply be wasting our time. Why should they want to come and listen to a message which, as far as they are concerned, is irrelevant and meaningless? We know that it isn't either of those things; but how do we get them to listen and learn?

And that is where something called "pre-evangelism" comes in - I trust you'll forgive the jargon! Quite logically, pre-evangelism comes before proper evangelism ever starts: it is all about building trust,

developing relationships, and initiating conversations so that people are actually able to listen to the Gospel of Jesus Christ. It is also about preparing the ground intellectually so that people become willing to take the time to think seriously about our faith. And - I must say this - one of the tasks of pre-evangelism is to demolish the barriers which we ourselves put up, and which make it difficult for people to hear the message: the barriers of language, of church culture, of musical styles, of dress code, of formality. We must prepare the way for reaching out to others; we cannot expect them to make the effort themselves.

All this means that any church which intends to reach its community with the Gospel has to take pre-evangelism seriously. It might want to organise social activities which offer an open door into the church: these could include parenting courses, play groups, or pensioners' lunch clubs. (In our church we could well say that "Thursday Forum" is such an event.) It might want to organise the showing of a good film which touches on spiritual subjects, and follow that with a discussion. It might want to bring in a high-quality drama group which can deal with topical issues. Occasionally a church which has been embroiled in controversy in the past - or which is simply regarded as old-fashioned - might need to arrange something to tell its community, "We're not like that any more, we've changed"; it might even need to say, "We're sorry" And central to everything is the need for ordinary Christians to spend time talking to the people we hope to interest in the Gospel: just talking among ourselves will never do the job.

This is all road-building work: slow, low-key, unglamorous and yet vital. It is all about removing hindrances and creating easy access to the church for those who are outside it. It is about smoothing paths, removing obstructions and opening doors so that people find it easy to inquire about our faith and find Jesus readily recognisable. This isn't work which needs bulldozers, diggers and steam-rollers, engineers and surveyors and navvies. It is work in which every Christian in every church can play a part: constructing the highway for Jesus to come along, so that anyone can (and, we hope, will) acclaim him as their king.

Roadbuilding

Roadbuilding is rough work
hard labour, muscles strained
hands calloused, back near breaking
even with lifting gear, hard hat, protective boots.

Site clearance is dirty work
and dangerous
removing rotten structures,
risking unsafe ground
uncovering long-forgotten corruption,
the stink too strong to breathe
of waste and dereliction.

God you cry out to us
to clear the site, build the road
because you are coming
and you will come
along the road we build.

Give your people, we pray
the will and stamina for the job.
Give us courage, to tackle the clearance
of debt and exploitation
which corrupt communities and nations.
Give us the grit and determination
to straighten out the crooked structures
which make it hard for the poor and the weak

to journey to freedom -
And help us to shout aloud that you will come
along the road we build.

Heather Pencavel