

Can we believe in the Incarnation?

Sermon for Choral Evensong in Trinity College Chapel

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‘And he rebuked the wind and the sea saying ‘Quiet now! Be calm’.

‘Don’t Panic, Don’t Panic, there’s absolutely no need to Panic!’

We are all, I hope, familiar with the character of Lance Corporal Jones in Dad’s Army, the one whose encouragement not to panic in fact has precisely the reverse effect on both him and his companions. It was perhaps to reassure minds as excitable as his that during the second world war the ministry of information produced a series of posters headed by the English crown and saying in large, soothing blue letters ‘Keep Calm and Carry On’.

What I hope to argue tonight is that calmness is not like cleanliness *next* to Godliness but is itself indicative of Godhead. Panic however is an abiding part of human experience and few people can get rid of it entirely from their lives. Of course it has different varieties. For instance, there’s the sudden, loud and violent type: the sort that afflicts poor corporal Jones. However there’s also the slow, sneaking and cold sort, which is perhaps more common. This is the sort which I’ve frequently witnessed people exhibit on train journey’s when they realise that they’ve got on completely the wrong service at Cambridge and are heading for

Kings Lynn rather than Kings Cross. The net effect though ends up being the same. Healthy stress in human beings produces a 'flight or fight' response: it either makes us remove ourselves from the situation, or spurs us into overcoming it. Panic on the other hand is quite different. It roots us to the spot, immobile and indecisive. It makes it impossible to do anything except perhaps quiver a little like badly set jelly.

'Do not be afraid' was of course a favourite public saying of Pope John Paul II, repeated often in sermons and speeches, but in a way quite different from corporal Jones. The two may have used their respective phrases with comparable frequency but that's where the similarity ends. John Paul II said it not only many times, but in many languages and with a staggering calmness which somehow communicated itself seemingly with the force of telepathy or osmosis to his hearers. For Christians living behind the Iron curtain, in churches operating under heavy restrictions and constantly in fear of renewed persecution, those four words held a comfort altogether out of proportion to their brevity.

John Paul did though not derive his calmness from himself but from the example and person of Jesus: the Jesus who during the storm can be found at rest with head on a cushion, whose calmness is communicable even to the wind and the waves. In Mark's account which we have heard this evening Jesus' words 'quiet now! Be calm' are ostensibly addressed to the elements but seem also to apply to his disciples' decidedly choppy and unsettled inner state. Time and time again throughout his ministry Jesus will in effect tell them by either word or example to 'keep calm and carry on': on the boat of course, but later also when they react

with dismay to his prophecies concerning his future reception in Jerusalem, and in the garden of Gethsemane when the high priest's men come to arrest him and the disciples are thrown into confusion and despair.

How can Jesus do this? An obvious answer is that because he is God's son, and indeed himself God, he knows exactly what's going to happen, that it's all going to be alright in the end. He can 'keep calm and carry on' like this because he knows that it's all going to end happily ever after. I'm not convinced by this though. For one thing it sounds a bit like someone who, disliking suspense, reads the last chapter of a John le Carre before the first! More to the point though it seems to shy away from the fundamental reality of the incarnation: the fact that in becoming human Christ mysteriously and totally emptied himself of Divine power without ceasing to have a divine identity – 'though he was in the form of God he did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself taking the form of a servant'. However we answer this question has to be respectful of the fact that Jesus is caught up in two sets of relationship; he is at once God's son and our brother.

How can we do this; how can we believe in the incarnation? I think the answer is to look back, back to the Old Testament, in fact to the story of Abraham and Isaac in Genesis. Isaac calmly does everything which he is told. He carries the wood for the fire of the burnt offering which his father intends to make of him, although he questions the absence of a ram he also at once accepts his Father's explanation: 'God himself will provide a lamb for a burnt offering my son'; he even allows himself to be tied and placed on the Altar without complaint. But why is he

so calm? It is certainly not because he *knows* that God will suddenly intervene and provide his father with a ram to put in his place. Isaac is not like us, being able to skip forward a few verses to see the end and then fashion his behaviour accordingly. He is not a student who has been given advance sight of the answer to an exam paper. No, rather his calm is to do with his total and unshakeable trust in his father.

What though of the relevance of this to the Gospel? Jesus is not calm because he knows the future through his own divine omniscience or trusts in his *own* power to control it: both have for a time been suspended, he is without them and in this he is our **brother**. Rather Jesus' complete calm comes from his utter trust as **son** in God as **Father**. Like Isaac he is sure that his father acts always for the good. However the relationship is more than that of Isaac to Abraham.

Remember the words of Jesus elsewhere in the New Testament: 'who when his child asks him for bread will give me a stone or when he asks for a fish will give him a serpent, how much more then will your father in heaven give good things to those who ask him.'

Jesus is sure that his father will, through the Spirit, be able grant whatever he asks for in the unheard, and to us unhearable, silence of his heart and mind whether it be it the multiplication of loaves and fishes or the staying of the winds.

So then, do not be afraid, keep calm and carry on believing in the incarnation.

Amen