

TUESDAY COMMUNION

Hymn: 404. It is God who holds the nations.

Reading: Acts 14.8-20

BEING TRUE TO GOD AND OURSELVES

On Sunday the RNA kindly invited Caroline and myself to be guests of honour at their lunch at the WMC. Very enjoyable it was. What I'd forgotten when they invited me was that I was expected to give an appropriate talk.

Well, I thought that I would speak about Alexander Scott, the chaplain and friend of Nelson, who remained with him after he was shot on HMS Victory. He returned with him to England and kept a vigil when Nelson was lying in state at the Admiralty.

What I discovered as I looked around was a picture called "The Apotheosis of Nelson".

It was very like those pictures one sees of the Ascension of Christ, his sorrowing friends watching him rise into heaven, except in this case it was the sorrowing Britannia with Neptune and the sea gods looking on. Nelson was becoming a god like figure.

Our reading today tells us how Paul and Barnabas were treated as god like figures after they healed a man who had been crippled from birth. I wonder whether, just for a moment, they were tempted to lap of this adulation. After all, it was a great contrast to the way they'd been treated in the last town they'd visited. There, according to Luke, they'd been "maltreated and stoned" and had had to flee for their lives. What a change to hear the crowds shouting, "The gods have come down to us in human form."

Jesus, too, knew how easy it was to become a hero.

His concern for others, his healing of the sick, the good news of God's love and mercy made one woman shout out, - "Blessed is the womb that bore you and the breasts that nursed you!" It was adulation which placed the spotlight on him and on who he was and what he was doing.

He promptly deflected the adulation:

"Blessed rather are those who hear the word of God and do it!"

Jesus also knew how quickly the crowds could turn from adulation to condemnation. We remember stories of Jesus speaking to his own people in the synagogue in Nazareth and their amazement at his gracious words. Then he challenges them and they become uncomfortable and begin to ask what right a mere carpenter's son has to speak to them in this way and they attempt either to kill him or cause him serious injury!

At the end of his life there is the suggestion in Matthew and Mark (but not in Luke's Gospel) that the crowds turn against Jesus and call for his execution.

Those who shout "Hosanna" one day, call for his execution on the next.

Luke's account of Paul and Barnabas being treated like God in Lystra actually finishes with Paul being stoned and dragged out of the city, supposing him to be dead.

So much for being god-like!

I suspect that this morning David Cameron knows the contrast between the cheers that greeted him when he formed a new government and the pain of rejection by so many MP's, including our own.

But what of ourselves?

Perhaps there are three aspects to living faithfully before God.

First, we seek day by day to be honest about ourselves and to recognise the truth about ourselves: thankful for the gifts God has given us and honest about our limitations.

Secondly, like Jesus and the apostles we seek the grace to point away from ourselves to the God who gives us work to do and the strength to do it. We seek not to be self-obsessed but to get on with that living which centres on loving God and loving our neighbour.

Finally, those words of Rudyard Kipling:

"If you can dream - and not make dreams your master;
If you can think - and not make thoughts your aim;
If you can meet with triumph and disaster
And treat those two imposters just the same";

Then perhaps we are living in the light of the one true God, to whom be glory for ever and ever.

Amen.