

21 October 2018  
21 after Trinity  
Evensong, Magdalen College

**‘Stretch out your hand. He stretched it out, and it was restored’.**

Words from our second reading; in the name &c.

I wonder if any of us have had any good arguments lately? I hope we have. And I hope that in a college chapel, in a great university, the question doesn't sound too odd. It's what we're supposed to be doing; it's what we're here for – to teach, to learn how to, and to practice having good arguments. Of course I don't mean fights or rows, but rather those kind of engagements when everyone is on the top of their game, knows their material, engages passionately but reasonably with the evidence, and when spirits and commitments run high but stay within the bounds of respect for all involved. Tutorials, for example, can't get very far, or at least are excruciatingly dull, if there's nothing to disagree with, to probe, to

question, to offer the challenge of a different view about, all in the hope getting closer to the truth.

And well we might keep our minds focussed on having good arguments here, because in this 'post-truth' age they seem to be on the brink of extinction in the public political sphere. The catalogue of horrors over the last two years is too long and too obvious to need listing here, but the Bishop of Leeds' summary of what has happened to public discourse and debate is as good as any: the 'tearing off the veneer of civilised discourse . . . unleashing an undisguised language of suspicion, denigration, hatred and vilification . . . the normalisation of lies, and the demonising of people who, with integrity and intelligence, venture to hold a contrary view'. The ten months that have passed since he offered that assessment have only served up more examples of the same that we didn't need.

Our second lesson, though, reminds us of something too often overlooked – that Christ models how to have a good argument. In the present circumstances I often find myself longing for the approach He took to morally bankrupt people and institutions when he cleansed the Temple – overturning a few tables, sending frauds scurrying from his flail in a supreme display of righteous indignation. But that prophetic act, so integrally related to the great judgement that was his Passion, was an exception. The *rule* in Christ's earthly ministry was something altogether different – something less immediately satisfying to the angry, but far more effective for those who want to argue well by being peacemakers.

First, Christ understands his opponents – and he knows to whom he speaks. And the two groups are often not the same. In our reading, he indeed takes his argument with the pharisees to the centre of their power ('he went into their synagogue'); it was also the centre of their teaching, and Christ knew, as we should in a

university, that with the gift of knowledge comes not only a great privilege of power, but also the obligation to protect the precious combination of power and knowledge. Christ, like the whole of Matthew's gospel, also makes repeatedly clear that the synagogue should have been a place not of faction and fight, but a place of holy common ground. But the very thing that united Christ and the Jewish leaders in God's Temple – the holy covenant that was the Law – was the source of their impasse. What to do? Christ shows that the answer is in the question. *Do*. That is, don't just argue or demonstrate with words, but *do* what you mean by those words. To the rhetorical question 'Is it lawful to cure on the sabbath?' Christ gives the miniature parable, with its perfect - spoken - answer to the question: 'Suppose one of you has only one sheep and it falls into a pit on the sabbath; will you not lay hold of it and lift it out? . . . so it is lawful to do good on the sabbath.' Stop there, though, and it is little more than the Biblical equivalent of an impotent, virtue-

signalling Facebook post – a meme with the picture of pitiful lost lamb with the caption, ‘Is it lawful to do good on the sabbath’, guaranteed to prompt assent from a group of like-minded friends. But standing with Christ among the pharisees *is* a sheep in a pit – a man with a withered hand standing in the centre of that circle of contested power and knowledge in the synagogue on the sabbath. ‘Will you not lay hold of it and lift it out?’, Christ asks. But Christ also *does*: ‘‘Stretch out your hand.’’, he commands. And ‘He stretched it out, and it was restored.’ ‘How much more valuable (indeed) is a human being than a sheep!’

But we should also take from this scene and the many others like it in the Gospels another lesson that Christ teaches about having a good argument: don’t expect miracles. That might seem a counterintuitive interpretation of a story about a miracle: but, the miracle here is not in itself the point. As Rowan Williams reminds us, miracles and miracle workers were a dime a dozen in the ancient

world, and when Christ performs one, ‘the miracle is not an argument-stopper; for healings [are not just] superficial occasions for wonder’, but for something far more important to having a good argument – and that is having a relationship. God ‘does not coerce belief’, He is not a God who sets out to ‘clinch arguments’, but He is a God who instead ‘demands relation and trust.’ And even though the healing of the man with the withered hand is one of the briefest of accounts of a miracle by Christ – it flies past without comment from anyone – the near wordlessness of the encounter stresses the eloquence not of the miracle itself, but the relationship with Christ that makes it possible in the first place. It is not ‘‘Stretch out your hand’ and it was restored.’ But ‘‘Stretch out your hand.’ *He stretched it out*, and it was restored.’ What Christ really wants the pharisees to see is not the healing, but the meeting – to see that crisis is overcome not by only one side asserting a winning argument or

waving a magic wand, but by establishing, and if need be, restoring relationships.

But I suggested at the outset that one's opponents in an argument and the people one actually and effectively addresses in an argument are not necessarily the same. No doubt we have all had the feeling summed up in the saying that 'there is no arguing with some people'. It should come as some encouragement that Christ seems to have felt the same way. The only response by his opponents to having seen him manifest in word and in deed how it was lawful to do good on the sabbath by entering into a new kind of relationship with someone in need was to 'go out and conspire against him, how to destroy him'. And, 'when Jesus became aware of this, he departed.' So what was the point of it all? The point was not to win an argument, but to show that those unwilling to enter into some kind of relationship with each other cannot even have an argument, much less be reconciled. But the point is also not to walk away – it

is to walk away and do more. 'Many crowds followed him, and he cured all of them' – more relationships, more seeking out of love and reconciliation, but not with the unwilling at the centre of power, but with those watching and listening at the margins, content in the knowledge that those lives that God changes through His love and action shown through us are far more eloquent living arguments than any amount of shouting at those who will not listen, or those who can't even hear us. God's servants will indeed, as Christ quoted Isaiah, 'proclaim justice', but they also, the Prophet says, 'will not wrangle or cry aloud, nor will anyone hear [their] voice in the streets'. That is not passivity, it is love in action, and a love that has to seek relationship - not confrontation, peace, not anger – and extend a loving hand in humility, remembering that neither we nor any of our arguments are perfect. Our hands too, remember, are withered. May we like Christ reach out to heal humbly asking that in

so doing, He will also make us whole. 'Stretch out your hand. He stretched it out, and it was restored, as sound as the other.'

AMEN.