

Epiphany IV – Nazareth Manifesto and 1 Corinthians 12

If I mention the name Matthew Shardlake to you, how many have the first idea who I'm talking about?

Matthew Shardlake is a fictional lawyer. He's the central character of a whole series of novels by CJ Sanasom set in Tudor England. Almost always, Shardlake is working on what seems a reasonably straightforward investigation but finds himself embroiled in the great power struggles of the day, between Protestants and Catholics, kings, queens and princes, and in the most recent book, *Tombland*, between the masses of ordinary people and the rich. *Tombland* is set in Norwich in 1549, and it tells the story of Kett's Rising, when thousands of the rural poor rose in protest against poverty and injustice, and ended up fighting two royal armies sent to destroy them. They beat the first, and were massacred by the second.

There's a boy in the book called Sooty Scambler. He's about twelve, thirteen perhaps. He's not the brightest, not quite right in the head – always singing to himself in public, doing odd things. He's no harm to anyone, but these days we would give him all sorts of medical/psychological labels. He is the constant butt of jokes, can't hold a job down, is always getting mocked and sometimes beaten. But he finds a home in the rebel camp. Suddenly, he is, to some extent, part of things.

Anyway... on the morning of the battle, a messenger comes from the King – a royal Herald with flags and standards and all the display of royal power. At this point, the rebels still hope that there might be peace, that the King might agree to some of their demands. But no. The Herald reads the most damning statement to them: they are traitors, scum, they must disperse immediately or face annihilation. I'll let Shardlake take up the story:

'Then it happened, the terrible thing that still haunts my dreams... There was the unexpected sound of laughter. I saw Simon Scambler standing, with some of the boys he had been speaking to, only a few yards from the Herald ... I distinctly heard one of the boys say, 'Go on, Sooty, do it. We'll throw you a party afterwards.'

Simon looked uncertain, pleased by the apparent friendship of his old tormentors but also afraid. 'Go on', one of the boys urged, 'show the old twit what we think of him.'

Simon stepped forward from the crowd, facing the herald from only a few yards' distance. Then he turned round, lowered his trousers, and presented his rear to the Herald, who stared in utter outrage as roars of laughter erupted from the crowd. Simon waved his backside slowly from left to right, adding to the insult.

Then Captain Drury, the Herald's officer, snapped his fingers at the man holding the container of live coals, who instantly opened it. Drury bent and lit the rope fuse, put the stock of his rifle against his shoulder, and pressed the trigger. The fuse hit the gunpowder pan, there was a loud bang and a puff of grey smoke, and Simon's backside exploded in a mess of blood and guts. He screamed, tried unsuccessfully to stand up, then staggered. The

bullet had gone right through his body, and as he turned I saw blood gushing from his stomach too, and his intestines slowly falling out. He crouched, swaying for a moment; then fell onto his face.'

I'm not quite sure why that passage had such a powerful effect on me. After all, it's only yet another example of the contempt the powerful have for the poor. To kill a child, casually, dismissively, for waving his bottom at you. Of course, you don't even need to look in fiction. That contempt is there everytime you turn on the news – everytime you scratch beneath the surface of a story about refugees, or the mentally ill, or about children in care, or about workers' rights – you find people treating others as if they simply don't matter, as if they're things to be used and tossed away at will. That, it seems, is the just the way the world is.

Well, the Gospel of Luke 4, the Good News, is that is *not* the way the world is. Or at least, it is not the way the world was made to be, and not the way the world *will* be. 'He sent me to bring the good news to the poor,' says Jesus: to proclaim release to the captives and the recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free and proclaim the year of the Lord's favour.' In other words, the world God had in mind from the beginning was one where people are *free* – where they are not constantly bowed down and crushed by the domination of others. The world that God wanted was one where everyone, *everyone*, had dignity, and everyone was able to stand up straight.

That is the world God made, and the great glorious news of the Gospel is that, because of Jesus Christ, that is the world that shall be. We may not be there yet, but one day we will reach the promised land. We can't say exactly what it will be like, any more than we can stare into the sun But everyone who has been crushed will be restored. All those lives tossed away, despised, treated like rubbish ... because of Jesus, they will be nursed back into glory. Justice will be done: those who have been ruined will be restored; those who did the ruining will meet that perfect union of justice and mercy which is Jesus.

That's the Gospel. And in our New Testament reading, from 1 Corinthians 12, Paul tries to sketch out what it means for how we live now. The Church is the people who believe that the real world, the world where we're going, is one where everyone has dignity and everyone has something to give. And we live now in the light of what will be true then. The church *now* is a community where everyone has dignity, everyone contributes. Where we renounce all talk of being better, more successful, more important than each other, all sense of competing with each other, and focus simply on how we can help each other, how we can serve each other.

And this is not just saying that we should look after other people – more excitingly, it's saying that we should expect them to look after us. Or, rather, that *everyone* but everyone is capable of contributing something, has some way of helping us all flourish. No-one is there to be simply passive, simply receiving, simply an object of others' care. People aren't things. They're gifts, gifts to each other. Even those who we don't think can give anything at all – say the profoundly disabled, or the dying – Christianity says, if you live with them deeply enough you will find something in how they are which you *need*. Perhaps the reminder that being strong, being successful, being competent is not what being human is about. Everyone

can give. That's why it has always been a mark of authentic Christianity that no-one gets thrown overboard. No-one is worthless: we build hospitals and hospices instead, because everyone has something to give.

So the question Luke 4 and 1 Corinthians 12 have to pose to each of us is: what are you giving? How are you helping the other people here, the church, be the best they can possibly be? What is your gift? And I don't just mean what are you giving in the planned giving scheme, though that is very important, or whether you're on coffee rotas or giving people a lift rotas or whatever – though all that is also extremely important. There is a more basic and even more important question. It's about your fundamental attitude. Why are you here? Why are you part of the Church? We so readily think, 'because I like it', or 'because I get so much from it' or because 'it helps me be in touch with God.' All of which is good and important, but is not quite up to the level of the New Testament. 1 Corinthians 12 says be part of the church because there's something that only you can give, there's a gift that only you have, that other people need. And it's not your money, it's not even your talent, it's *you*. You are God's gift to the people around you. *You* are the only way *we* get to be how he made us. You – unremarkable, unimpressive *you* – you are that important, that precious.

So please, this year, with all your heart and soul and mind and strength: join in. Be yourself, with us -week after week, event after event, one shared life. Let's grow close together this year, and one day, together, we will reach the Promised Land.

Amen.