

ANANIAS – A MODEL OF DISCIPLESHIP

Andy Warhol is supposed to have suggested that in the future “everyone will be famous for fifteen minutes”. It’s a ridiculous idea, of course. I certainly haven’t been famous for one minute, let alone fifteen, and I don’t expect most of you have either. But all the same it’s true that some people do enter history for a brief moment or two, and just as suddenly disappear without trace.

We heard about one of these in our reading from Acts this morning. He appears briefly in the story, and then we never hear of him again. And yet the effect of his ministry is incalculable. It is no exaggeration to say that without him Christianity could well have remained a tiny sect within Judaism, and within a few years might have died away entirely. The fact that he is remembered by name shows what an important contribution the first Christians believed he had made.

Perhaps you have already guessed who I am talking about. I’m referring to Ananias, the real hero of the passage from Acts that we’ve just read. Paul’s the one who usually gets all the attention of course, but once he arrives in Damascus it’s actually Ananias who is really at the heart of the action. He must have become a Christian through the influence of the very first disciples, and would have been one of quite a small group in Damascus. Having said that, they must have been making some sort of impression for Paul to have felt the need to weed out this new heresy from the local Jewish synagogues. Ananias and his companions would have been well aware of his imminent arrival in the city and would have been expecting the worst. But in the event, things turned out very differently from what they feared. Instead of the arrival of a confident Saul threatening mayhem, the sightless Paul has to be led into the city by the hand, like a child. His world has been turned upside down and he is utterly confused and bewildered.

And so comes Ananias’ fifteen minutes of fame. I think he was remembered because he embodies many of the qualities that we all need in our own discipleship. To begin with, he is attentive to God’s call. He listens, and makes himself available. “Here I

am, Lord”. We all need this quality of attentiveness. It’s about learning to discern the presence of God as he reveals himself to us within the circumstances of our daily lives. We need to cultivate a listening, expectant openness to events as they unfold, so that we respond appropriately. After all, if this really is God’s world, then he will be continually revealing himself within it and through it, and that will include the people I meet, the challenges and the joys of daily life as I experience them moment by moment. It’s a matter of tuning in to God as he comes to us through the challenges and opportunities of the present moment.

I don’t think it’s fanciful to believe that Ananias had something of this quality of attentiveness. In any case, he took his courage in both hands, and obeyed the call. The Bible often simplifies events of this kind. I think it’s unlikely that Ananias heard God speaking as clearly as Luke makes out. There probably wasn’t an objective voice telling him what to do, and in fact what he experienced was a persistent niggle urging him to go and find Paul. He questioned and argued for a while, as we often have to do with challenging decisions. Prayer is often a struggle at such times. We have to work hard to discover where the truth actually lies. I remember very well having to decide whether to accept a particular job or not. Part of the problem was that it was almost too attractive, and it took ages to sort out my feelings, and discover the right response. We talk about God’s call. Well at the time it didn’t feel at all certain that God was doing the calling, and it took quite a lot of heart-searching to decide how to go forward. Being attentive to God does not necessarily mean that suddenly everything becomes clear and obvious, and sometimes it takes a while before the right way forward emerges.

By the time Ananias actually presents himself before Paul, he’s done this work and knows what his role is and how to fulfil it. Here is a blind man who needs to feel the assurance of human contact, so he places his hands on his head and says, “Brother Saul”. He is speaking, remember, to the very man who has threatened them all with imprisonment and even death, and he has no guarantee at this point that anything has changed. But he nevertheless addresses him as “brother”, affirming their common humanity in Christ. Put yourself in Paul’s shoes and imagine what it must have been like to have been greeted as a brother by your erstwhile enemy.

In all this Ananias is acting as a Christian representative. Think how Paul is feeling for a moment. Lying on his bed, he must have been going over everything that he had heard on the Damascus Road. The voice he had heard had said: "I am Jesus whom you are persecuting". He's had three days to reflect on the significance of these words, and then along comes a representative of the very people he had come to persecute. "I am Jesus whom you are persecuting". He has come to Damascus to persecute Ananias and his companions, so Ananias must stand for Jesus. The same Jesus who has spoken to him on the road now comes to speak to him in this room in the person of Ananias. It's when Paul comes to recognize Jesus' identification with his followers that the scales fall from his eyes and he begins to see truly. Later on he was to develop this insight in his teaching about the nature of the Church. He writes to the Christians in Corinth: "Now you are Christ's body, and each of you a limb or organ of it". We are one with Christ, and united with one another in him. Christ acts through us. "I am Jesus whom you are persecuting." Paul's teaching comes directly from his personal experience.

I love this story. The new priorities and values that Paul needs to embrace are modelled so beautifully for him by Ananias. True conversion of life means giving attention to God speaking to us through our experience, committing ourselves to responding with courage, hopefulness and grace. Discipleship involves a response to God that is lived out in how we behave towards one another, particularly towards those who are most vulnerable, unloveable and difficult, recognizing that God speaks to us through them, and they are therefore our brothers and sisters. All this Ananias models for Paul at this turning point in his spiritual journey. And having done so he is quite happy humbly to step back into the shadows, and we never hear of him again. As for Paul, his encounter with Ananias was the beginning of a life of ministry and service that transformed the Church.

I feel very close to Ananias. He stands as a pattern for our own discipleship. What he models for Paul, he can model for us. An attentiveness to God; courage and grace in response to life's challenges; sensitivity to others' needs to help them respond in their turn, and finally the humility to be ready to step back so that others can go forward. May these qualities characterise our own life in Christ, and by his grace may we ourselves be Jesus to one another and to those we meet.

