

In the Spirit

Isaiah 49:1-7; John 1:29-42

In the last week or so we have had two inspiring speeches from the United States. Barak and Michelle Obama on two separate occasions spoke wonderfully in ways that stirred not only their fellow Americans, but a nervous world. Though there will be some who will challenge this, it seems to me that to have survived eight years in the White House with no major scandals, to have demonstrated what looks like a wonderfully close and resilient marriage, to have brought up two lovely daughters, and to have brought an integrity, intellect and thoughtfulness to the Presidency is no small feat.

Michelle Obama has said recently:

“You may not always have a comfortable life and you will not always be able to solve all of the world’s problems at once, but don’t ever underestimate the importance you can have because history has shown us that courage can be contagious and hope can take on a life of its own.”

That’s inspiring.

Barak Obama said in his farewell speech:

“For too many of us it’s become safer to retreat into our own bubbles, whether in our neighbourhoods, or on college campuses, or places of worship, or especially our social media feeds, surrounded by people who look like us and share the same political outlook and never challenge our assumptions. In the rise of naked partisanship and increasing economic and regional stratification, the splintering of our media into a channel for every taste, all this makes this great sorting seem natural, even inevitable. And increasingly we become so secure in our bubbles that we start accepting only information, whether it’s true or not, that fits our opinions, instead of basing our opinions on the evidence that is out there.”

That’s inspiring too.

Monday in the United States is celebrated as Martin Luther King Day. That hero of civil rights, whilst no saint, spoke and lived in such a way that the inequalities of humanity, and the unfairness of life, still remain challenged by what this martyr had to say. He once said:

“Life’s most persistent and urgent question is, ‘What are you doing for others?’”

Where we draw our inspiration from will tell us not only something about the source of inspiration, but about the things that we value and place as important in our lives. If you are inspired by the Dalai Lama, or Winston Churchill, or Mother Teresa, or Jane Haining you will learn something about who they were and what they represent, but you will learn something about yourself. Why do they inspire you? What is it about the way they lived their lives, or the things that they said, or the things that they did that inspire you?

In those very early days of Jesus’ ministry, when nothing was known about Him, when His teaching had not been shared, when miracles had not been performed, when the great tradition of faith that we know as Christianity had not been shaped and developed, what was it that was so attractive about Him that people not normally given to radical religious commitment followed Him? What was so inspiring about Jesus?

John’s gospel is written with the benefit of hindsight, many years after the events of Jesus’ life. John looked not only through the lens of history, but the lens of belief. In a vision of what that time might have looked like, the gospel writer John sees God’s Spirit descend. John sees in Jesus someone who symbolises inspiration.

What was it in Jesus that Andrew and Peter thought was inspiring? Was it how He looked? Was there something in the way He spoke? Was it the fact that Jesus spent time with them? Was it insight into their situation and needs? Was it the fact that He listened to them and talked to them?

We will not know what it was that inspired Andrew to go and tell Simon Peter about this baptised man by the Jordan, or that Andrew felt the need to say of Jesus, “He is the chosen one of God.” But there was something. Was it the thing that inspired Jesus to be Who He was coming to touch Andrew and give him an insight and give him the words to say?

Inspiration is a very hard thing to describe, but we know it when we see it and when we feel it. When an athlete is at the peak of their fitness and body, mind and soul come together. When a musician plays music so that they become part of the music itself and there is no division between the player and what is played. When the words of a book or a talk pierce right to our hearts and we know and feel that something has shifted and changed within our lives.

Inspiration is not so much a concrete thing but something that breathes into our hearts, our minds, our bodies, our souls and we are made different. We see differently. We understand better. It may be something transitory, or it may shape the entire direction of our lives.

Inspiration may be the impulse and the insight, but it needs to go further or it withers. The point of the Holy Spirit coming down from Heaven was that Jesus would rise up from the water and set foot on the earth and begin to make things happen. The point of the Holy Spirit breathing into Jesus' life (that's what inspiration means – to breathe in) was that Jesus would breathe out and speak and act and heal. The coming down of the Spirit, the breathing in of the Spirit, marked the beginning of what Jesus came to do. It confirmed Him and activated Him. He was inspired in order that others might be inspired because of Him.

Inspiration amounts to very little if it does not go on to inspire us to do something or to be something. Inspiration is not simply about giving us a warm, fuzzy feeling of goodwill to those around us; it is about lifting us up so that we might go out to tackle something, improve something, offer something in and to our world.

I wonder if it was that that Andrew, and then Simon Peter saw in Jesus on that day by the river Jordan? And seeing Jesus, and hearing Jesus, and following Jesus, they found themselves inspired to be something and do something that would likely never have occurred to the otherwise.

There are inspiring people and things out there that lift us up and make us wonder and be glad and be comforted and be warmed. But the inspiration, if it is to be completed, has to come out in our thoughts, our words and our actions.

Being inspired and being the inspiration, Jesus says to His first two followers, "What do you seek?" They wanted to know where He was staying. Jesus then says to them, "Come and see." Inspiration is about seeking and seeing.

This morning in the cold month of January, when many of us might be at a low energy level for a variety of reasons, in our relationships, in our work, in our life outside the home, in the Church, when we feel far from being inspired, maybe not even wanting to be inspired, hear the voice of Jesus saying to us, "What do you seek?" Do we seek a world built on fairness and justice? Do we seek relationships, the way we treat all the people in our lives, to be marked by kindness and compassion? Do we seek in the work that we do, whatever it is, to be the very best that we can offer? Do we seek, in the next conversation or words we have with someone after this service, to build up and encourage, to praise and to make better? Are we capable of being a Church that embodies this testimony of Jesus? Are we capable of being inspired by Him to come and see where He stays in the world, and the things to which He seeks to draw our attention because they need our inspiration and our action to make them better?

Receive the Holy Spirit today. Be inspired. The in the Spirit go and make things happen in the Name of Jesus of Nazareth.

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.

Amen