

PRESIDENTIAL ADDRESS TO DIOCESAN SYNOD MAY 2017

During the evangelism workshops so far approaching 300 of us have looked at Paul's arrival in Athens and how he attempted to live and proclaim the Good News. We reflected that the three contexts in which he evangelised were very different and that his approach in each place would by necessity have had to be correspondingly different. The synagogue ... the market place ... and the university each presented their own challenges and Paul's skill in proclaiming was stretched.

I don't exaggerate when I say that most of us who have looked at this Acts 17 passage had great sympathy with Paul; we would not have known where to start any more than we seem to know where to begin today. We all however, along with Paul, know that try we must – we are compelled to do so.

With these experiences fresh in my mind and in the light of the horrendous act of terror in Manchester with the questions concerning how such events can happen, I come to the passages of scripture the church sets before us at evening prayer today. Moses and his call to lead the people out from slavery into new beginnings; and the gift of life to the widow at Nain.

As Moses leads the people into the unknown their life together is disturbed in a number of ways. The Book of Numbers is described in Hebrew as "in the wilderness" and that place presents its own particular challenges and the cultures of the people who inhabit the lands through which they wander also present their distractions. The essence of the Book concerns how the people, liberated from slavery, journey towards the land of promise. As such it presents for us, the New Israel, some relevant and often poignant commentaries about our own journey from release from sin through baptism to the total freedom of the Promised Land. It should speak to us of our progress towards our destiny to occupy the wide open spaces of eternity in communion with God and all the saints. For us, as for the People of Israel, it is the destination that dictates the direction of travel. The one essential difference being the fact that, for our journey, we have the road map and the perfect example of the means of travel, in the person of Jesus Christ. We do not have to wander in order to discover the destination; this has been revealed to us. Our wanderings are as a result of us needing to be constantly recalled to the eternal truth of the revelation.

The landscape of the time through which we travel has a variety of contours that dictate the severity and shape of the challenges with which we are confronted. Whilst there appear to be massive differences between a millennium BC and two millennia AD there are, in fact, some distinct similarities. For the people of Israel and for us there is an attraction to slavery to old ways and familiar patterns. To be enslaved can have the appearance of comfort and security. To stay locked away and isolated was undoubtedly a temptation for the disciples as the day of Pentecost approached. To stay in the Upper Room would have been far less costly both to resources and livelihood. These matters are not far beneath the surface of some things on our agenda.

However it is the temptations imposed by the culture through which we journey that are different. Those which we face are, I imagine, rather more insidious and superficially attractive than the choice between donkey keeping or sheep herding; and war-mongering or homemaking.

There is much in the multi-ethnic and multi-cultural atmosphere of western society in which we can and should rejoice. It expands our horizons and deepens our awareness of variety and contrast. But there are two closely aligned and significantly problematical notions, echoes of which find resonance in many of our superficial attitudes and accommodating desires. These are that everything is relative, and that includes truth; and the ever-growing acceptance of the false god of inclusivity with its seemingly unquestioned consequence, that discrimination of any kind is basically a new capital offence.

These two cultural imposters both find their nemesis in the gospel story from Nain. The young man, healed, is the only son of his widowed mother. Therefore the fruit of this healing miracle is doubly important. The young man is returned to life and his mother has her life restored. Without her son, her future is inevitable degradation and ultimate death. So this is a real miracle of life and that in its fullness. Physical life, social life, economical life; life in all its aspects and facets. This is what God, in Christ, offers humanity. This is the message that was on the lips of the post-pentecostal disciples and this is what we live and breathe to proclaim. Life in its fullness, real life, that for which every human has been created. This is true, eternally and about things that prevented people having this life, Jesus was vociferously discriminating and decidedly non-inclusive.

Jesus discriminated. He discriminated all the time. What he did flies in the face of our ostrich in the sand, over-therapeutised, self-regarding, self-indulgences. "Oh, we mustn't judge and mustn't discriminate" comes our cry – but Jesus did. All the time. He was very rude to the pompous moralising figures he met. He discriminated energetically between them, and people of real humility. He was caustic about the self-protection of wealthy people who got addicted to the power their wealth gave them, in contrast to the vulnerable, generous poor.

He was ruthless rude to the puffed-up proud people he encountered, in contrast to the quieter, kinder meek. He did not respect the self-regarding vengeful. He did not respect the people who hid behind the rules and went light on love. He would not put up with people who refused to forgive others and threatened and warned them that at the point they would need forgiveness, they would not get it themselves.

If we allow a little bit of honesty to cut through our public platitudes for a moment, there are times when we all discriminate, as for example between people we can trust and people we can't; people who will protect us and can be relied on, and people who are likely to stab us in the back.

Of course we discriminate. So let's learn to do it ethically and wisely; let's learn to do it well instead of destructively, or pretending we don't or shouldn't do it at all. And it is here that we find the confluence of these two major cultural frauds that need to be disarmed. Where else do we find the truth about ourselves, our relationships, origin and destiny other than in

the person of Jesus who, in last Sunday's gospel, tells us that he is the truth? He tells me the truth about who I am, where I am from and what is my destiny. He tells me the truth because it is he who can take me to where I have been made to be. This is what we believe about Jesus and it is the truth of the revelation that gives us the grounds for our judgement.

I am the only way, truth and life; hold onto me, walk with me and I will tell the truth to you, I will describe it for you, I will live it in you. This is what had grabbed a hold on Paul and thrust him to his knees. As he got up he came to realise the truth of the revelation that until then he had been trying to eliminate. It was this experience that compelled him to evangelise with the truth that had set him free. This was the story that he told and it is that same story that we exist to tell, again and again. The challenge confronting us throughout the diocese and, therefore the one which should dominate our deliberations as a Synod, is, to quote C S Lewis,

“Christianity, if false, is of no importance, and if true, of infinite importance. The only thing it cannot be is moderately important.”

No ... infinite ... or moderate? Life in its fullness or a poor substitute. These are the yardsticks by which we should judge our contributions both here and hereafter. And how we live and proclaim that which is of central importance remains our primary challenge; and it is a life and death issue.

A handwritten signature in black ink, featuring a small cross above the first letter, which appears to be a stylized 'J' or 'I'. The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.