

THE FIFTH SUNDAY AFTER TRINITY

PREACHER : Canon Neil Thompson, Precentor

Sunday, July 12th 2009

10.30am
Rochester Cathedral

Twice during the past week on television, I have seen the poignant and distressing scene of hearses being led through the High Street of Wootton Bassett, as slain soldiers have been flown back from Afghanistan to RAF Lyneham in Wiltshire and then on to their families.

As the small crowd stood silent or weeping, it is hard not to ask what is the point?

Indeed, another 8 soldiers have died in the 24 hours from Thursday to Friday.

Every time a life is lost we have to ask ourselves as to the worth of the cause and the likelihood of the success of the enterprise.

But this morning I am not asking the question as to the particular rights or wrongs of the policy of the British presence in Afghanistan and the fight against the Taleban.

I am asking a bigger question of myself, you and our nation.

What do we stand for? What are our values, commitment and even our passion in pursuing and living the truth of lasting peace and justice?

We think we know what the Taleban stands for and what kind of society they wish to enforce.

But, what is our civilisation and value system based on?

And it is this question that the Bible asks us, time and time again through its pages.

Contemporary Britain, would never link the Bible and the Christian faith with a contemporary critique of our society's moral compass.

We live in a land whose people and society have been formed for nearly 1500 years by the Christian story but whose people know little or nothing of it today.

And in a conflict with fundamentalists such as the Taleban, ignorance and repulsion with religion may not only characterise much of our national outlook but also set us ever more firmly in that secular pragmatism that has now replaced the realm of faith and a sense of the transcendent.

This isn't just a question of Richard Dawkins and Christopher Hitchens being a popular read and atheist posters on buses and hoardings encouraging people to ditch any belief in God.

Unless we share, teach and tell the language and stories of faith, there can be no real dialogue with an unbelieving world and certainly no understanding of what undergirds the centuries of western and European civilisation in law, government, art and science.

Instead we live in a world that makes things up as we go based loosely on much self-interest and a mild sense of altruism.

I now want to introduce the emotive word 'decadence'.

Decadence is about decline as well as destructive self-indulgence.

In our Gospel reading from St Mark today, we see a ruler, King Herod, and his court who exemplify the word decadent.

John the Baptist was in prison for condemning Herod's liaison with his brother Philip's wife, Herodias.

What unfolds at his birthday party is Salome's dance and Herod's extravagant and dangerous promise which resulted in the bitter and twisted Herodias demanding the head of John the Baptist on a platter.

This episode is sickening and underlines the danger of speaking out and speaking the truth.

Confronting our failings and being called back to a relationship with the transcendent is intrinsic to the life of faith and the integrity and power of the Christian gospel.

This past same week has also seen much publicity concerning the official launch of the Fellowship of Confessing Anglicans. This group has talked of a 'new reformation' and a fight for 'the soul of the nation'.

For me, this language is unhelpful. God's future never allows us to return to the past, and reformation is a process, a never-ending process, not a realignment of power and forces and the imposition of new thinking.

Our other reading this morning from 2 Samuel shows us where we have come from - with King David strengthening his new political Jerusalem by bringing to it the Ark of the Covenant and making the city a religious capital as well.

Tony Benn's mother use to teach him that the Old Testament is about the battle between the kings and the prophets: the kings who exercise power and the prophets who preach righteousness.

It may sound simple but it is very true. And the conflict continues through every age.

And interestingly, Tony Benn has another insight that we would do well to note: "*A faith*" he says "*is something you die for, a doctrine is something you kill for. There is all the difference in the world.*"

And it is the mystery of faith, of God and his love that reaches out to us as a world this morning and exemplified in the passage from St Paul's Letter to the Ephesians.

Power and dominion, time and eternity, personality and glory – all these are given, promised, won and bestowed throughout all the human ages through the grace and blessing of Jesus Christ.

All things are being gathered up: things in heaven and things on earth – and the cost of sacrifice and love bring forgiveness and an eternal future.

That grace is set in story – a truth lived in history and leading us through today into the future.

It is a story that we have to learn to tell more effectively and with more commitment.

And the story's power and our part in it are made real here at the altar of God.

This is the place of love and sacrifice, of word and sacrament, of time and eternity, of food, hospitality, pilgrimage, self-offering and blessing.

This is the meeting place where spilt blood and God's risen life meet us in what we bring, in our hunger and frailty; where God feeds us with the bread of eternity and wine of forgiveness and salvation.

The crucified and risen One risks himself as we reach out our hands and drink the cup.

And the risk is that we will resist his call to repent and change, to speak out, and to learn and see with fresh eyes.

We are a part of the testimony and conversion of England – and that conversion is not into piety or ‘churchiness’ but into joyful sacrificial living.

This cathedral was built beyond the scope and capacity and even at times the building technology of the monks who lived here.

They created a space of prayer and welcome, of worship and encounter.

In 2009, we must continue to use that dimension of God’s life in the spirit which is our imaginations. And we must tell and re-tell the story of God and his love, in our lives, our common life, our words and our actions.

Karen Armstrong, a former Roman Catholic nun who taught my eldest daughter English at school, has just published her latest book: *The Case for God ~ What Religion Really Means*.

“We have lost the ‘knack’ for religion,” says Armstrong. It is as if the success of science in the material world has rewired our brains, made us tone-deaf to myth. “Is it true?” we keep asking, meaning, “Did it really happen? Is it literally true? If not, we’re not interested.”

Armstrong goes on to show how even the words “I believe” have changed by a scientific lens, to mean “I assert these propositions to be empirically correct.” Yet the original Greek *pisteuo* means something much more like “I give my heart and my loyalty.”

People still give their hearts and their loyalty even on a society where selfishness is encouraged and rewarded.

The men and women whose bodies have been brought back from Afghanistan have risked and given their lives.

And God says nothing need be in vain. Christ has visited the place of the dead; he has shared the terror of impending arrest and the agony of torture and death.

There is nothing beyond that which God can reach – except our freedom to reject either by deliberate decision or complacent carelessness.

Lord, teach us how to sing your story of salvation in a foreign land.

Christ, you walked on the sea,
But cannot walk in a poem,
Not in our century.

There’s something deeply wrong
Either with us or with you.
Our bright loud world is strong

And better in some ways
Than the old haunting kingdoms:
I don’t reject our days.

But in you I taste bread,
Freshness, the honey of being,
And rising from the dead:

Like yolk in a warm shell –
Simplicities of power,
And water from a well.

We live like diagrams
Moving on a screen.
Somewhere a door slams

Shut, and emptiness spreads.
Our loves are processes
Upon foam-rubber beds.

Our speech is chemical waste;
The words have a plastic feel,
An antibiotic taste.

And yet we dream of song
Like parables of joy.
There's something deeply wrong.

Like shades we must drink blood
To find the living voice
That flesh once understood.

In the Twentieth Century ~ James McAuley

Amen.