

REGENERATION

PREACHER : Judith Armitt, Lay Canon

Sunday, October 18th 2009

2 Corinthians 5:17-21; Matthew 19: 28-31

10.30am
Rochester Cathedral

Don't we all love living in Britain- the weather provides enough conversation to prevent us talking about anything that matters; half the population is willing to watch sport for long enough each weekend to give the rest of us chance to have a life; and in Britain there is absolutely no need to learn a foreign language. When we're abroad providing we shout loud enough, there's always someone who's been fluent in English since the age of 7 to answer; and it never puts us to shame.

Joking aside, I do love living in Britain; it's a green and pleasant land, with so much stunning countryside, difficult to be more than seventy miles from the sea; the country is stocked full of history, culture and spiritual heritage, including this fine Cathedral, and pretty much everyone has enough to eat, and a roof over their heads.

And, it's a vibrant country; not sparse like the States, or some parts of Europe. There's lots of us: 61 million people on a relatively small island, so you never need to go far to see your neighbour.

There's only one thing I don't like about living in Britain; we own the gold medal in being negative. You know: that ability to see the downside. You're given a new pair of black socks, and you know the colour will run; you give your Aunty a box of chocolates and she tells you how many calories they contain; Barak Obama gets the Nobel Peace Prize for setting a new direction for international relations, and everyone says it's too soon. You know the sort of thing.

In my day job I'm in the Regeneration business, trying to make places better for people to live in. For a long time that was here in Medway and the wider Thames Gateway, and now it's in Ashford, about 30 miles from here.

There's no better role for people being able to see the downside. When people ask me at parties what I do for a living and I say I work in regeneration it's nearly as good as saying I'm a Lay Reader in the Church of England. When folk recover themselves the next question will surely be along the lines of: so it's you who's concreting over Kent then? Well no actually.

What's Regeneration about? For me it's about re-building communities physically and socially. Taking places that have lost their spirit as well as their attraction, and reclaiming them for people, hopefully bringing better jobs, education and quality of life and making transport improvements, as well as better places physically. It's about renewal, hope, a belief that things can get better. But the sceptics are all around.

Take the new high speed trains. Have you tried one yet? At the moment they're running from Ashford, and from Ebbsfleet-not far from here. They will run from Medway from December 13th-2 months time. Believe me, people who haven't tried them will give you any number of reasons why they're no use whatsoever:

they're too expensive;
they go to the wrong part of London,
they'll generate dormitory towns,

you haven't time to read your newspaper,
you have to spend more time with your husband/wife,
you can get home in daylight and might have to do the washing up,
you **can** get a seat, so your skirt or suit might get creased,
they're punctual-you can't use the train as an excuse for being late any more
and ...there's no chance to exercise British fortitude because the heating works.

The list is endless. Yet Ashford people using the high speed trains can save nearly two hours of their life each working day, to get to the best connected railway terminus in London, and indeed onwards. This could make going to see family or friends in York a day trip rather than a polar expedition; and they could come to you. That's regeneration.

My theory is you have to be an optimist to work in regeneration. I'm an optimist and a Christian..... Sometimes I worry that's a contradiction in terms. After all we're all sinners and this is a fallen world. In my doubting moments I worry about whether it is right to believe, persistently as I do, that God has given me a ministry, to do what bit I can to make the world a better place. After all the world is not perfect now, and never will be until God's will be done on Earth as it is in Heaven. Am I in the wrong job?

I recently learned about a technique the Church uses to think about personality sometimes called the Enneagram. This strange sounding beast looks at our fears, weaknesses and sins and explains why we behave as we do, driven by: guilt, anger, lust, vanity, fear, greed, envy or deceit. It's a real barrel of laughs.

It's a clever technique for revealing the evil side of our nature and pointing out our delusions, but indulged in too much might we despair?..... or just accept the awfulness of it all. It's that negative streak again. Theologically, does this approach forget that while we surely are sinners, we are also a forgiven people?

In our reading from the second letter to the Corinthians this morning, Paul the author is keen to make a similar point. He says:

'So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation'.

That one sentence speaks volumes. The 'old' creation is set out in Chapters 1 and 2 of Genesis, and the temptation of Adam and Eve is in Chapter 3, that's on page 3 of most Bibles. If that's Game Over you might wonder why the Bible is well over a thousand pages long. But of course it's not all over, with the fall from God's grace of Eve and Adam. While the Old Testament is the history of a fallen and lost people seeking, finding, and then losing again the Promised Land, the New Testament tells of a world with all the potential for rescue and redemption, through the sending of Christ.

Did I say 'potential'? Well it's not a cast iron certainty that we'll take the opportunity to be redeemed.

For each one of us, whether here in this Cathedral, or outside, we have a personal choice to make. Christ died for our sins, to forgive us, for every act of anger, lust, greed and all the rest of them. But only if we will turn to Him. Only if we are 'in Christ' as Paul puts it. Only if we acknowledge our sins, (and perhaps I should concede the Enneagram might help here) and determine we'll try to do better, fail though we undoubtedly will some of the time.

The power of being in Christ, for accepting Jesus as the driver of our lives, is that our lives are transformed. There is suddenly and immediately a new creation: hope, renewal, regeneration. All that despair, that hopelessness that characterized the fall, the exile and the scepticism we see around us, they're swept away. Instead there can be energy, strength, and hope and a glimpse of the glory of God in the next world.

'everything old has passed away; see everything has become new!'

Paul's excitement is palpable.

'All this is from God who reconciled us to himself through Christ'

The danger is, if we've heard it a thousand times before we might somehow take it for granted; but isn't it truly amazing that, even though human beings had let Him down time after time after time, God loved us so much, so very much, he was so determined to be reconciled to us, he sent His Son to find us, every single one of us, (if we will come) and bring us back to him through the Cross.

'in Christ, God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us.'

There are two messages here; the first is of God's reconciliation with us individually and personally as believers; the second is God has given us the ministry of reconciliation to take to others: for me that's about spiritual reconciliation with God and physical reconciliation with the world God created and gave us to care for, bringing about the new creation that Christ has made possible, imperfectly that's for sure, in the world we inhabit now; but waiting in excited anticipation for rescue, redemption and regeneration at the renewal of all things.

'So we are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us;'

Oh! Did Paul say we're expected to take the gift of reconciliation to others. He did.

So what does this mean for us when we leave the Cathedral this morning? You'll be pleased to hear we don't all have to join the regeneration industry. There are many ways to be an ambassador for Christ and to take the ministry of reconciliation to others. There are a thousand ways to make the world a better place, and we can play to our strengths in how we do it. That's what God surely intended. Perhaps you're good with people and could counsel those in despair; perhaps you're good with money and can help work out how to spend it to bring the greatest benefit to the greatest number. Perhaps you already set an example in combating climate change by limiting your use of energy; maybe the great gift you bring is in nurturing children and teaching them to treat others fairly and without discrimination. What strikes me about all these descriptions is that they're positive about life.

In my dreams there's a news bulletin that tells of the positive stories. It says that the hole in the ozone layer is closing now we've stopped using CFCs and it is, it says scientists have developed a vaccine to prevent most cervical cancer, and young women are receiving it this year, and they are, that there is enough food to feed all the world if only we will share it fairly, and there is. That the President of the United States has held out an olive branch of peace to his enemies and been applauded for it.

People who help reconcile the world to God are actively seeking change for the better. Driven by the power of Christ we can do so much more.

Amen