Sermon Trinity 11 2021

St Godwald’s

Preaching is a dangerous sport as anyone who has ever tried it realises. At times the preacher feels called to stray onto territory the sureness of which is uncertain. We are rightly expected to comment upon issues in the public arena and yet few of us do, largely – to quote next Sunday’s collect prayer – because of those things of which our conscience is afraid. It is far easier to sound hypocritical than wise.

One topic much on my mind currently is Climate Change. One cannot have watched those images from Greece, California and elsewhere this past week without feeling a mixture of dismay, horror and fear. What is it going to take to change the hearts of business people and world leaders so that the brakes can be put on this downward trajectory to ultimate destruction? As a relatively new grandfather these questions are not academic. Humanity is at real risk of destroying itself. This is most definitely something of which my conscience is afraid. Could I have done more, could I do more to save God’s world entrusted to us?

In the light of those images of firestorm horror COVID19 feels manageable – at least in this country. Yet, when the dust settles, I am sure it will be revealed just who has been profiteering at our collective expense, as we face tax rises to pay for what will inevitably feel like poorer quality service provision in our schools and hospitals.

What links these two issues together – Climate Change and COVID19 - is greed. For it is greed that drives the exploitation of people and planet as if the only generation that matters is the one currently in control.

There was a time when I enjoyed a good disaster movie but these days they feel more like documentaries. We know how tragic and ethically compromised life is without needing to make a drama out of it.

One book I enjoyed reading not too long ago is ‘A Fort of Nine Towers’, the true and very personal memoir of Qais Akbar Omar growing up in Afghanistan under the rise of the Taliban. Another tragedy much in the news this week.

‘A Fort of Nine Towers’ traces the family as they are forced to leave their successful businesses and wealth in Kabul and begin a wandering, nomadic lifestyle around the country as they are buffeted from one area to another in order to avoid horrific violence.

One night, the family not having eaten for 24 hours, the father encourages Qais to steal some pomegranates from a large garden. The son is distraught at having to do this for he does not want to be known as a thief, but follows his father’s instruction nevertheless. Without the father or the son’s knowledge, they are seen by the garden’s owner, and the following morning awake to find a beautiful breakfast laid out for them on a blanket beside their car.

In this story we are witnesses to the breakdown of social order for one family as they struggle to survive. What is especially telling is the speed with which hunger undermined that family’s faith and expectation of humane treatment by others. But also, the speed with which it was restored by another family who not only recognised their plight but understood the essence and the implications of divine generosity.

Translating this into our own time and place, it is easy to see how swiftly our social fabric could collapse through fear, and especially through economic or climatic crises, but also how central our faith could be to preventing it worst consequences.

The letter Paul wrote to the Ephesians, a part of which we heard this morning, is packed with encouragement for new believers as Paul seeks to instil in the church in Ephesus the wisdom he has gleaned not only through his own life experience – for he writes from prison – but from the older Hebrew scriptures too.

“Be careful how you live…make the most of every day…understand what the will of the Lord is…give thanks to God at all times and for everything…

I cannot stand here and pretend for a moment that my track record on this is very good. It is challenging in our relatively comfortable and secure society to live as if our lives depended upon God – and yet, of course, they do.

Faith requires discipline in our culture, for the motivation of necessity that might bring us to call upon God’s help at times of genuine need, is often missing. In such circumstances we need to be intentional about our prayer and study life; the time we give to supporting one another in conversations about God; the lifestyle choices we make that demonstrate an attentiveness to the presence of God and the needs of others.

Our common life in the church is most important in sustaining one another through difficult times. It matters that we come together for worship. Whilst I am committed to retaining zoom for those who cannot come to church, I do wonder if the wider embracing of online worship nationally isn’t harming our congregational fellowships. For here in the intimacy of shared worship within sacred space that is filled with beauty and a sense of rootedness in time and place, we come close together to the experience of the divine.

As a country we might be emerging from COVID but we cannot say that for the climate for many years, not in most of our lifetimes and not even perhaps in those of several generations to come.

Despite such difficulties, faith, that great symbol of stability and continuity, could do much to sustain and protect our national life. May each of us through the diligent expression of our faith and our attentiveness to the wisdom of the scriptures play a small part in restoring hope in a nation, in a world, uneasy with itself and divided as to its future direction. Amen.