

Sunday 4 July 2010: Fifth Sunday after Trinity

Readings: Isaiah 66.10-14; Luke 10.1-11, 16-20

As a mother comforts her child

So I will comfort you

You shall be comforted in Jerusalem

In the name of God, Source of all Being, Eternal Word and Holy Spirit. Amen.

I wonder if you remember some character in your life who was off stage not centre stage but immensely important to you – perhaps a kindly junior nurse who noticed your having a bad day in hospital, or the doorman who greets you on the way into work every day, or some kid who goes dreaming down the road into school and dreaming out loud makes you grin?

For me at Lincoln Theological College where I trained to be a priest there was the Warden's wife. Larger than life, with a shrieking voice she used to charge into my tutorials in her husband's study saying "Pardon me sweetie!", pull down a book or two from the shelf and pull out from behind the books a cake tin she had hidden from her own dieting eyes only to unpack and eat until the next diet became necessary. "Want some sweetie?", she would shriek, utterly regardless of whether I was praying or crying or talking!

I adored her – in a rather grey world of rational male tutors I found her a reassuring mother figure whose laughter did me good – at a time when our Archbishop of Canterbury's wife had rather a dowdy appearance – not I hasten to add these days – she would appear at Christmas reviews dressed daringly with a notice on her back "Not the Archbishop of Canterbury's Wife" – I leave the rest of her garb to your imagination!

But the real reason she did me so much good was that in the hot house of an Anglican theological college, on the top of a steep fenland hill with nothing but flat land between ourselves and Siberia, Caroline Richmond was a boisterous practising Anglican, a disciplined faithful Christian and a confident sharp theologian, if of a colourful eccentric turn. She managed herself and a family in not the easiest of circumstances and went on to teach theology afterwards, when the period of her husband's warden-ship was over.

It was her words about the Eucharist particularly and church belonging generally which have stayed with me. "Darlings" she would say, "Darlings – sometimes it's a dinner party and sometimes you're lucky if you get a rich tea biscuit. Just got to keep at it!"

I remember those wise words today because they are also words which can be spoken of home – sometimes rich as a dinner party, more often than not as boring and as comforting as a dry old biscuit you dredge up from the bottom of a tin.

And I am thinking about Eucharist and home because there is in today's readings a tension explicit between religion and faith in God as Home and religion and faith in God as being sent

out to do something, Missio the latin verb to send from which we get our word mission, the tension of being our sent out by that very God who is also our home!

Being at home in God is a terribly important vein in the mine of faith for many of us to plumb. Our relationships with each other, our resting in prayer, our time spent in study, our sharing sacraments together all smack of home – stories, rituals, movements of the body even and ways of belonging here which increase our sense of rest and dependency and bring us home. For many of us we simply cannot get on with loving our neighbour until we rest ourselves in the love of God which is why so many of us call this place – or the beloved church from which you come to visit us – home.

I say for many of us because I don't believe it's like that for all – some of us don't have a good sense of home and need to find quite other metaphors for church, and yet others of us are called to a negative way – God explicitly as not home, as the wound, the testing one, the barren land, and those people need to be contained in the Christian tradition too, and not scorned as non-joiners but simply on their own road.

Nevertheless for most of us Church as home matters enormously as Jerusalem mattered to the returning exiles whom God promised in the prophecy of Isaiah:

“You shall be comforted there as by a mother at home, you shall be safe, secure, nourished, held”

At the same time if there is any passage to remind us that Church never was, never has been and never should be identified as a permanent home or therapy couch or “glass bubble” it's this morning's Gospel reading. For there perched in Luke's Gospel between the glories of the transfiguration – where God shines at home in human flesh – and the Good Samaritan – where a stranger comes to bring us home – perched there is an early story of the Christian mission to the Gentiles. Here are 70 missionaries going to the supposedly 70 nations of the then known world and they go as lambs into prisons, floggings, market squares and emperor's palaces as they will to share their faith in the Book of Acts to come later.

How we hold this home sense and mission sense in balance is something for each of us to ponder and for the churches from which we come to think about hard. But I have a few observations.

One is that when Jesus foresees the effects of mission he brings the end time of God's purposes for us into time itself – he sees Satan falling from heaven – we might say that we see evil being vanquished and peace reigning between human beings. And when we see those things happening here – loneliness banished by our pastoral care, lives turned towards a more whole future in the work of the Connection at St Martin's, ontological angst as dear Antony wrote on last Sunday's pew sheet healed – then we can be proud and confident in our faith that this place which is home is not just bubble but also the place where we see Satan falling like lightning from heaven and give thanks. Dinner party indeed!

Another observation I have is that some people's rich tea biscuit of everyday life is MISSION and when we are thinking of what next to do perhaps we ought not to overlook at the same time how best to support them. I am terribly aware as I knock around the fringes of things of some of you working in tough areas of the world – Rwanda and South Africa and ... do I do enough to support you and pray about you seeing our mission as yours, yours as ours? I do know more as it happens about the worlds of some of you who are up against the most sticky of mental health

problems and situations in which you try not only to survive but to help – but have we made your mission ours and ours yours, do we know enough about what you are doing to pray with imagination for you – and the same for those of you in the worlds of education and finance and administration and law, yes and family life and ageing and unemployment – most of us facing huge challenges to the very working fabric of our lives through the cuts in budget to come. Have we made your mission ours and ours yours? Biscuit crumbs indeed to chew over and wonder about our companionship of you. Who do you walk with?

Yet another observation is that when one merely mentions the word mission some people here will feel worried and guilty and try to get under their pew seats! Clare, haven't we got enough on our plates? And I want to say yes you probably do! For some people those strange unknown mission fields are inside the self or across the table in our child or mother or father or neighbour or friend - part of my warden's wife's helpful presence lay in her everyday awareness of duty and limit and present occupation without being in the least bit self-centred – just there are times when the unknown is right beside us and that is more than enough to be getting on with.

But lastly I cannot help but observe in the context of mission and of a dawning poverty across the world and in our country that here we exist in a big and wealthy house indeed – rooms, music, website, café, bookshop, clubs – why families live in rooms the size of one of our downstairs loos! - and therefore of a sense that now we are equipped, we are also waiting, ready, poised between his Transfiguration and our transformation – to see where God will send us to overcome evil with good, so that the dead may be raised and the poor have good news preached to them.

Jesus said to them “I saw Satan fall from heaven like a flash of lightning”

Who needs us that the burden may fall from them?

Thanks be to God for a sense of home that deepens and sends us out

Amen