

Sunday 9 July 2006: The Fourth Sunday after Trinity

When we're all at sea...

Readings: 2 Corinthians 12.2-10; Mark 6.1-13

"Then Jesus came to his home town...and he could do no deed of power there...and he was amazed at their unbelief."

They do things differently in other parts of the Anglican Communion. A friend was asked whether he would allow his name to go forward to be a bishop in another Province where bishops are elected. He thought and prayed about it, talked with people close to him and decided that he should let his name to go forward to allow the process of discernment to continue. Then people who knew him, or people who didn't really know him but who lived nearby, started to get calls from Evangelicals in the diocese concerned. They asked two questions: What's his line on Issues in Human Sexuality? And how does he respond to Evangelicals?

Dear God is that what we have we done to each other, that in the search for a new bishop, these were the only two questions that mattered? No 'Does he say his prayers?', 'Is he transparently holy, a pastor, teacher, someone with whom you see Christ and feel close to God?' But only, What's his line on Issues in Human Sexuality? and How does he respond to Evangelicals?

As today is Sea Sunday, it's a fair use of the image to suggest the Church is all at sea. The Roman Catholic, Mgr Ronnie Knox, said that, "He who is prone to sea sickness should not go down into the engine room of the barque of Rome". On dry ground our own Dick Sheppard said that, "Clergy are like manure. Spread about the country they do a lot of good but gathered in a pile they are apt to be offensive." Not only clergy: the Church talking to itself about Church matters can be pretty dreadful.

"Then he went about the villages teaching...He called the twelve and began to send them out two by two."

The Church is much better when we are engaged with the wider world. It's a curious reverse of that which we allege is normally the case in which the world saves the Church rather the Church saving the world. Yesterday's drumming for Trade Justice was a good example. It was a reminder to our politicians that we want them to work for Trade Justice, as well as debt relief and increased aid. It also recalled us to our main task, in which we are confronted with things that really matter and bear witness to something distinctive: "God was in Christ reconciling *the world* to himself" (John 3.16).

"So they went about and proclaimed that all should repent."

There's a cutting edge here and it cuts each of us at least as much as it cuts our politicians/government. The Church's task is to witness to the coming of the kingdom of God on earth as in heaven. Too often we have turned away from this task, failing God, ourselves, and our worldly neighbours. Repentance is the turning around, facing a different way, and being renewed. It comes about not because of our strength and sense of righteousness but because of our sense of inadequacy in the face of God. In the language of the epistle, we are repentant not because of our strength but because of our weakness. That's what opens us to Christ, to

God. In the New English Bible's first translation of the Beatitudes: "Blessed are those who know their need of God, the kingdom of heaven is theirs".

Friday was the anniversary of the 7th July bombings. It was a great deal more significant than I had expected. At noon everyone, including the traffic, in Trafalgar Square stopped. No one was sure when the two minutes ended and one or two people began to move, hesitantly. Then the church bell chimed and in our part of London everyone felt free to move again and the city came back to life.

In the evening here in church a short introduction was wanted for the concert marking the anniversary. I said that on the Sunday after the bombings we broadcast a service live on BBC Radio 4 with the Bishop of London, and a Rabbi, and an Islamic woman educator who used to be at the Regents Park Mosque. We did this together because terrorism seeks to divide us and make us frightened of each other. It was too early just to pray for peace. The service expressed our anger at the bombings, and our grief for the 52 who had died and the 800 who were injured. Only then could we begin to think about what makes for peace. As Christians we remembered our duty to pray for our enemies because that is what Jesus uncomfortably taught. A verse from the prophet Micah (chapter 6 verse 8) came to mind:

"What does the Lord require of you but to act justly, love mercy and to walk humbly with your God".

That requires something of us all, with its priority of justice and its lovely overlap with God who is merciful, as in Islam. It struck me we might want to dwell on the equal requirement to walk humbly with God.

It's been a repeated theme in sermons here in recent years that religion is part of our world's problem of violence, particularly religion that asserts its certainty with too much confidence in its own rightness. Both within the Anglican Communion and among the world's religions, it would help a great deal for us to walk humbly with God.

In the Gospel reading today, Jesus came to Nazareth, his home town, and they didn't know him, and he couldn't do much with them. So he sent his disciples out in pairs to the villages.

"They cast out many demons, and anointed with oil many who were sick and cured them."

We're easily embarrassed by this part of the story and sometimes don't know what to make of it. Yet we do know about our own need of healing and of our sometimes being gripped by a sort of corporate madness in the way we are living, which we fear for our world and for our children is a sickness unto death.

Here then is the weakness of which St Paul spoke in today's epistle, which is the most marvellous opportunity to open us to Christ and to the healing he brings. It will serve God, the Church and the world ill simply for us to join confidently in asserting 'us right them wrong' in the face of all the complex difficulties we face in Church and world., To hold fast to Christ is the core task. The gentle, confident way of Christ with its love and truth and joy for those who would act justly, love mercy and walk humbly with their God is profoundly healing for Church and world in a time when we're feeling all at sea.