

Sunday 20 June: Third Sunday after Trinity

The beautiful game

Readings: Galatians 3.23-29; Luke 8.26-39

Yesterday I received a text saying that the England football team in South Africa visited an orphanage. “It is nice to put a smile on the faces of people who have so little hope and are constantly struggling”, said Themba Pokwane, aged 6.

Friday night’s performance against Algeria was dreadful. World class footballers looked anxious and the team choked. I hesitate to say this at a service which includes the baptism of an American but so much for our being in the easiest group to qualify for the final 16. On Friday night it was visible that fear and anxiety make it impossible for even great footballers to play the beautiful game.

By contrast – and I know this is self-serving but it’s just an example - every now and then I get a glimpse of the freedom experienced at St Martin’s in our renewed buildings. Yesterday there were two services in the Dick Sheppard Chapel for the Friends of St Martin’s and the Friends of the Connection. There was wonderful food and in separate meetings over 100 people gathered in support of the church and our work with homeless people. In The Connection Colin Glover, the Chief Executive, spoke of his anxieties about the current economic and political climate in which demand for services is up, resources are down, and the co-operative network of agencies supporting homeless people might fracture in the competition for survival. We were told how in the last year The Connection helped 80 homeless people into jobs, 600 into hostels and 1,000 were reconnected with their home areas. Then Richard Carter spoke about the Spirituality group he runs, which often contributes to his sermons. It was terrifically energising.

In the Hall, the Friends of St Martin’s had the privilege of listening to Neil MacGregor talk about his radio series, ‘The History of the World in 100 Objects’, as if it was completely normal for the Director of the British Museum and a colleague to give up their Saturday afternoon for our church group. Up in church the Vasari Singers and South Bank Sinfonia rehearsed the Bach B Minor Mass whilst a shifting population of over 100 people listened attentively. A visitor asked me if this was a prayer session. To say, “No, it’s a concert rehearsal” would have missed the point. In the evening, whilst the concert enthralled nearly 800 in church, there was another concert in the Hall organised by London Citizens, an East meets West event with Chinese music.

This open, inclusive church has found its vocation and whatever the strains of making it all happen, I doubt St Martin’s has ever felt more free or more creative. You couldn’t legislate for it. It’s something to do with the freedom of life in the Spirit of God. Philippa Smethurst’s father said, “And it’s only Saturday”!

This is similar to what the early Church experienced. St Paul, who was brought up in the best of Jewish schools with impeccable religious credentials, thought that the Law was a discipline. It’s an inadequate account of Law in Judaism but Paul says that the Law kept us on the straight and narrow and protected us from the worst of ourselves as well as each other. In Christ he found astonishing freedom. Not that anything goes, but by God’s grace rather than our own puny efforts, we come alive and live up to our ideals. Shockingly, the old categories of division fall away.

As many of you as were baptised into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male or female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus. *Gal.3.28,29*

It is hard for us to hear how radical this was. Paul, a child of Abraham, recognised that ‘in Christ’ Gentiles are Abraham’s children, too. This free man said slaves also had spiritual freedom and that women were not property but people. “For all of you are one in Christ Jesus”.

In 1912 an Anglican missionary priest called Roland Allen published a book called ‘Missionary Methods’. He observed that when St Paul came to communities he did not settle down with them. He preached the Gospel and moved on, leaving people who were young in the Christian faith to work out for themselves the implications both of the meaning of their new faith and its organisation as a church. Paul’s letters to the churches in the New Testament often seem to answer questions sent on to him by the churches he has left behind. We have to reconstruct their questions from his answers. What happens when we die? What if people start the Eucharistic meal before everyone has gathered? Should we be keeping Jewish food laws? Can we eat food that has been sacrificed to idols? And so on. Paul wrote back to the churches in the places where he has been; he sent friends and helpers to visit; occasionally he arranged a follow-up visit himself; but broadly Paul recognised the church as a local entity, and trusted in the Holy Spirit to dwell in it. He left the people who had been baptised to work out their own salvation in fear and trembling. Roland Allen thought these were the reasons for St Paul’s success as a missionary and contrasted it with what most missionaries in his own day wanted to do by imposing beliefs, order and structure.

The first Christians were brilliant at rooting the good news of Christ in the local context. That’s why Christianity became global. Matthew’s Gospel is shaped by the Judaism of his community; Luke’s by being addressed to Greeks and Gentiles. In the Acts of the Apostles Luke tells us that Paul in Athens made a magnificent speech observing how religious the Athenians were. They even had a temple to an unknown God. Instead of denouncing them, Paul told them that we human beings have a common ancestry and in our day God has called us to repentance and to live under the judgement of a man who has been raised by the dead. Some scoffed but other said, “We will hear you again on this.” And then we are told,

At that point Paul left them. But some of them joined him and became believers, including Dionysius the Areopagite and a woman named Damaris, and others with them.

After this Paul left Athens and went to Corinth...

Acts 17.33 – 18.1

Roland Allen on Paul is so illuminating in the present controversies of the Anglican Communion, which is made up of 44 self-governing regional and national churches in 160 countries. The more we choose to operate as a single centralised body, the more our Communion of 80 million people becomes fearful and anxious about unity and uniformity. We struggle to accommodate the integrity of the local church responsibly trying to evangelise in its own context. Given that so much morality in the New Testament consists of lists of the common virtues of the Greek and Roman world it is baffling that we think Christian behaviour today has to have identical form in Peshawar as San Francisco.

Fear and anxiety will cause us Anglicans to become more and more tense and less and less able to play God’s beautiful game as our bad tempered team continues to underperform. What is needed is for the manager and coaches to recognise we’re playing in the wrong

formation. If instead they compound the problem by wanting to impose more and stronger rules, a Covenant, to ensure we all interpret the implications of the Gospel in the same way, we will choke and lose that fluency and creativity which caused others previously to wonder at the genius of Anglicanism, with its ability to flourish in the varied contexts of every parish in England.

It is tempting to end this sermon in a flurry and misuse the Gospel of the Gadarene swine by projecting evil on to those with whom we disagree and wish they would go and jump off a cliff. Just to state it like that gets us beyond it and our adolescent anger and self-righteousness. What Jesus consistently undermined was the religiously self-righteousness. The Church is the community of the resurrection who gather around Jesus Christ. Most of us come to church only too aware that we fall short of the glory of God our maker and redeemer. Baptised into Christ we find a new freedom not to be anxious or fearful about our shortcomings because nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus. Start living in response to that, as people who dwell in the love of God and call God's love out of others, and the real evil in our world will start to fall away as we play the beautiful game in which God's kingdom comes on earth as it is in heaven.