

Sunday 18 May 2008: Trinity Sunday

Festival Evensong

“Holy, holy, holy is the lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory”
Isaiah 63

It is difficult to imagine that there has ever been 3 weeks in the life of St Martins like this. Bishops and archbishops have not always been top of the invitation lists here, but during this great festival they have been coming and going like people stuck in a revolving door and if Episcopal indigestion were not enough, there has been the richest possible musical diet to compliment the words from this pulpit.

And so this evening to the conclusion of the Festival in the Fields. Depending on your point of view it might be seen as the muck cart after the Lord Mayor’s Show, the hair of the dog after a heavy night, or a decompression chamber for those who need to adjust slowly to coming gently back to earth.

Whichever way we see it, we are all breath taken by what has been done here, by the courage, ambition, vision and determination of those who have made it possible. And by the generous invitation to many of us who have known and loved St Martins for much of our lives to be part of this celebration.

We who are visitors can only begin to imagine how the community here at St Martins may be contemplating life after the Festival: joy and satisfaction, pleasure and gratitude, relief and exhaustion must be part of the emotional and spiritual climate. But underneath all that, perhaps a question – as yet not fully asked – Who are we now?

Questions about identity surely arise when there is growth and change. The effort takes most of the available energy: involves so much focus on vision, so much work at building trust, confidence, releasing gifts and generosity. So now who are we? What (with all this done) defines us?

And to seek the answer may be we need to direct our attention to a figure sitting in a gilded holy place, in the heart of a capital city, surrounded by the sights and sounds and smells of worship – Isaiah in the Temple.

Let your imagination work on it for a moment. The temple is large and imposing: in front of us is a variety of sacrifices, priests doing their stuff with impressive seriousness : temple guards standing relaxed on duty at entrances and exits. There are booths for selling animals for sacrifice: smoke and incense: different groups chanting, others popping in and out, much bobbing and bowing. Over all presides the Holy of Holies and all the human activity seems to be going on without too much reference to the apparently indifferent gaze of the God who dwells there.

And perhaps on the edge of it all, perhaps quite unnoticed by others, a man for whom all this activity no longer obscures and instead suddenly reveals the presence of One whose glory fills the whole world.

And at that moment Isaiah knows what he can never again un-know; that he is called to be part of God’s purpose, even though it will be mocked, misunderstood and

misrepresented. And that he is called to stand at whatever cost, in the place where God stands amongst his people – namely in the place of shame and rebuke and disregard. And the man we can glimpse in the shadows of the Temple can just be heard to be repeating “ Woe is me!”

How do we learn to live by that vision? Well, one of the glories of this restoration of St Martin’s is the East Window which holds our gaze. Some of us smiled when we read Simon Jenkins piece in the Guardian applauding the work of St Martins while regretting its roots in the Christian Faith. For Simon Jenkins the East Window was no more than a satisfying abstraction. For most of us surely, it depicts the crucified Christ. The one who supremely occupied the place of shame, of annihilation and death as if they are not the most important things. The one who (as St John’s gospel tells us) gives us his spirit – the gift which enables us to stand where he stands, which sets us free from being beguiled by a search for success, or victory or inhabiting an economy of winners and losers. The one who gives that which alone makes possible a ministry of reconciliation and therefore the path to new life.

Five years ago, on the day after outbreak of the Iraq war, Radio 4’s today programme were seeking for a bishop to interview about Christian/Muslim relations in this country. Down the telephone line, John Humphries pressed me with questions about why the House of Bishops was not supporting the war. Eventually came the inevitable question: “Which side is God on in this war, Bishop?” The question is defined by a certain world view: progress comes from victory: success is being on the side of the winner: approval, reputation, status and security are the goals of a zero sum game (not unlike yesterday’s cup final) and our gods are all on one side or the other”.

But the gift of the Holy Spirit and the identity it confers, comes not from winning or even being the best, nor from tribal solidarity, nor from defensiveness nor from revenge, nor from success, nor from any other of the structuring forces of our society. Rather it comes from one who was prepared to be in the place of shame – able to open up a space in which reconciliation can happen when we realise that victory for one passes through the healing of the other and not his diminishment. That the gift of the Spirit produces the desire to be reconciled with others because we know that there lies growth for both of us.

What might all this mean? It means that gay people will find their true home, welcome and security in the church so that there can be a new creation including a space for those who are presently seen as opponents. It means that the House of Bishops could square the circle of proceeding to Ordination of women as bishops without either crushing the spirits of those opposed or the spirits of women who are called by God to this office. It means the Lambeth Conference could open up a space where different world views sit together in the company of the One who gave in His Spirit so that a new humanity could come to birth.

Challenges and conflicts such as these pass through the very life blood of St Martins, here at the heart of the City with all the connections with the world church, the media, with other faiths with networks stretching across a globalising community.

The answer to the question “who are we now?” is therefore of course what it always has been. We now are the followers of the crucified one. Who frames the worlds

conflicts in an entirely new way and calls us to the huge risk of entering that frame and inviting others very different to join us in it.

St Martin in the Fields has been the inspiration to many of us who try to live like that for many years. For all this renewal and for the glory of the Lord revealed within this place we give thanks today, and to the future a renewed commitment to work for a reconciled humanity, standing in the space only the crucified one can create, we commit ourselves tonight.