

Sunday 9 May 2010: Sixth Sunday of Easter

Change you can believe in

Readings: Revelation 21.10, 22 - 22.5; John 14.23-29

Jerusalem is 'the city of peace or wholeness'. So it is some irony that Jerusalem is one of the least peaceful cities on earth, built on the fault lines where Jews, Christians and Muslims meet. It is one of the places where we are most aware of how awful things are between us as well as of how wonderful the God-given opportunities for living together. "O pray for the peace of Jerusalem" sang the Psalmist, recognising long ago that we carry within us the hope of something better, that it is time for a change.

The General Election has been terrific, and it's not over yet. Full marks to the Party leaders who have worked so hard. They are intelligent, articulate and passionate in a way that has been good for us as a country. Of course they have used 'sleight of hand' in the way they presented themselves to get our votes. Talk of change was mostly to encourage us to think that because we are fed up about the economy, and worried for our children and about the environment, we need a new government. Religious vision mixed with politics can be exhilarating but it nearly always disappoints, just as nearly every political career ends in failure. Politicians need vision to motivate themselves and us but there is danger if they come to believe too much in themselves. So we can be glad if they are supported by a true and self-critical religious faith and are motivated by love, but what they do as politicians has to be practical and governed by justice. They are using power for good in ways that can be tested and held to account. They are not creating the kingdom of heaven, though a few steps in the right direction and the personal humility of knowing they stand alongside us and under judgement would be very welcome.

This week it has been very unsettled at Morning Prayer. Every day, Richard, Katherine or I open the church at about 7.30am. We try to set-up by 7.45 so there is a period of silent prayer before Morning Prayer begins at 8 o'clock. Most days there are 5 or 6 of us, sometimes 7 or 8, rarely more. Every day there are quite a lot of others who come into church first thing, some days as many as 20 or 25. Mostly men, they sit at the back and sides, either on their own or in 2's or 3's. One has been coming most days for years. He isn't homeless. He talks loudly to himself as he comes through the door and quickly settles down to read the paper. Others have been in the Night Centre at The Connection and use us as a waiting room whilst The Connection is cleaned and opens again at 9. Others have been on the streets. Most look exhausted. Those who have been around a while are pretty good at helping to look after the place and make sure the newcomers are respectful. Occasionally someone reminds us that they are part of our silent congregation. This week they weren't very silent. Twice I got up to look sternly at people talking loudly, and someone who was lying on a pew at the back rolled off it with a noise that made me wonder if the place was being smashed apart. This is 'the church of the ever open door', as it has been since 1914 and Dick Sheppard's vision in which people streamed into church saying this is the temple of the Lord, this is their home, this is St Martin's.

Nothing is asked of those who come here other than respect for the place and people. It can seem pretty passive but for each individual there's more going on. Those who use The Connection are engaged in a programme of change. We're not trying to maintain people on the streets but to

help them get greater control of their lives by making small, difficult, positive choices that will help them into accommodation, work and society.

Some of the others are using the church to rest and think. They know this is a place of safety. They may not come here asking to meet Jesus, though some do, but they often challenge us about the gap between our vision and reality – “Call yourself a Christian?” An open church is a great leveller because what is asked of each of us is that we do to others as we would have them do to us. It is best to meet each other with kindness because there will be times when we need others to do the same for us. In that simple small way we witness to the kingdom of God and start to be the change we want.

Since Easter the first of our readings at the daily Eucharist has been from the Acts of the Apostles, stories of the first disciples living out the implications of the resurrection. They have been very illuminating, telling the good news of Jesus Christ in a variety of ways to Jews and Gentiles, showing the excitement and commitment of those who set themselves on the Way as well as the cost of discipleship.

I have also been struck at the frequency of phrases such as, “there was no small dissension” and of the number and depth of rows in the early Church about whether Gentiles had to become Jews in order to be a Christian, and specifically about male circumcision and the keeping of Jewish food laws. These are not things that preoccupy us now, though there are other issues about which there is no small dissension among us Christians.

The passage from Acts that was set for today – but which we did not read – was of Paul having a vision to go over into Macedonia to help preach the good news. There Paul and Timothy sat outside the gate of the city of Philippi, by the river, where they supposed there was a place of prayer, and sat down and spoke to the women who gathered there: outside the gate, with the women. Among the women, Lydia, who came from Thyatira, opened her heart and she and her whole household were baptised. Given that Lydia dealt in purple cloth and Friday saw the publication of the proposed framework for women bishops in the Church of England, I missed a trick in asking for the passage from Revelation to be read this morning.

I might also have missed a trick because the Acts of the Apostles deals so straightforwardly with the practicalities of organisation in the early Church. They had to sort out issues of money and of personal commitment to the church just as we have to do over the next month with our Stewardship Renewal. At one level we simply need to follow on from our Annual Meeting two weeks ago and say, “This is what it costs to run the church and because I am committed to it, believe in it, this is what my own contribution will be.” Making a financial commitment is about our responding to the excitement and energy of Christian mission in this place. That includes our commitment to Christian Aid this week and it includes our contribution to sharing some of the tasks and responsibilities of our daily common life.

But this morning, the Sunday before Ascension Day, I wanted us to hear the reading from Revelation instead of Acts because it is a vision of the heavenly city, the new Jerusalem. This is the big picture. In it,

“I saw no temple in the city, for its temple is the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb.”

Here is light for all nations and the gates are never shut. In the new Jerusalem, in the worship of God, we find our true place with God, with one another and all creation.”

The stories of Jesus, and of how God meets us in his sacrificial love, are the way to the heavenly city which is our vision and our hope of the kingdom of heaven. The life, death and resurrection of Jesus gives a certain confidence. On earth the departing Christ tells his disciples to abide in love and to allow ourselves to be strengthened by the gift of the Holy Spirit so that God's kingdom will come.