

Sunday 16 November 2008: Second Sunday before Advent

Encouragement

Readings: 1 Thessalonians 5.1-11; Matthew 25.14-30

“Therefore encourage one another.....as indeed you are doing”

As I climb up in to this pulpit to preach this morning I feel a little like the prodigal daughter who having enjoyed a secure fulltime post in the ministry team of this Church 10 years ago then ran away to the flesh pots of Soho leaving you to renew the whole building before coming back! The only mitigating circumstances are that instead of lounging around the night clubs and brothels and pubs I visited them instead as Soho’s Rector so I hope I am forgiven!

What I have found on coming back – if perhaps not a golden ring and fine robes – is something of infinite value to me, encouragement. The gift of encouragement in my work for the charity Inclusive Church and in my being among you as a self-supporting priest; – encouragement in Nick’s welcome, encouragement in Liz’s careful induction, encouragement from many of you to use St Martin’s as a necessary home while I coordinate the work of Inclusive Church around the country.

The encouragement of each other in the Christian life is such an important part of being Church together and I want to explore this morning how part of the way we are encouraged in being Christians is to provide role models for each other , saints and companions, icons to fashion ourselves by .

Another encouraging habitat of mine is the Church of St Peter in Walworth where I walk regularly both to pray and to talk to my boss. I was walking there on the morning after we had heard the result of the presidential election in the United States. I wasn’t sure, but I felt that I was meeting the eye more often of Black people, men, women and children and smiling, smirking almost conspiratorially – the world is better this morning , we have a black icon and his family on the way to the White House , we can walk taller. As I read the papers that day I realised my hunch had been correct – that some black and minority ethnic people had been so encouraged by Barak Obama’s personality , work and colour that they had felt it worth voting for the first time in their lives. Imagine that, the first time! And there was a cartoon of a sign beside a White House pond – Please No Walking on the Water! A cartoonist had beautifully captured the hopeful “in taking of breath” that life will never be quite the same again for black and minority ethnic people – their aspirations can be of the very highest, someone has gone before them where they would go.

What this morning walk with its smiles and greetings reminded me of was the reception to women being made priests within the Church of England. I remember once standing on the Tube very soon after we had donned our dog collars for the very first time and an American shoving me so hard on the shoulder in a friendly punch that I almost fell over – Alleluia – God bless you sister!

The icon of a woman wearing what is a sign of holiness, of holy and responsible leadership in our society mattered and opened peoples eyes not just to a renewed priesthood and a renewed Church but to new possibilities for themselves – they were encouraged.

What I found in Soho, which I suppose has deeply marked me and left me with questions to ask of myself and the Church, is whether despite the free grace of God being offered to all, we are not actually a bit stingy about our creation of encouraging role models and icons of holiness. The models of women in Soho's shop windows which affected me deeply as they do all women in Soho are of playthings caught in sexual frivolity or bondage or torture, It is time that the Church created women as bishops to counteract those images which pervade not only Soho's shop fronts but much of our advertising these days – thank goodness for Michelle Obama but where is her like in the House of Bishops? The importance of finding her like there is not so that women may get to the top or that feminism may conquer but that women may find themselves in God!

I found that it was far from easy to be a first generation immigrant trying to find work and home in Soho if you are black. But where is our black leadership within the Church to counteract that desperation and encourage others – we have begun but we have not got far – one male archbishop, one bishop, one dean, but no black women at all in senior roles. I am really pleased to be working with Inclusive Church at St Martin's on St George's Day next year to be forming the first national conference of the Association of Black Clergy, asking the question what does it take for a black or ethnic minority person to succeed in our society and Church?

As for the gay freedom of Old Compton Street – of course some of it is fun and liberating but there lurk too there those utterly corrupt and corrupting aspects of the so-called scene. We desperately need role models for the gay and holy life. What else is the Church offering but subtle condemnation?

Encouragement comes from finding people like us further along the journey we want or have or need to make, which is why it is so important that the leadership of our church reflects a greater variety of person that more and diverse people may be encouraged in the way of Christ

But in case you are worrying that Soho left me merely a firebrand, a rather noisy Clare in the Community, you will be glad to know that I became more acquainted with Christ there too – the human being who brings divinity in to our humanity and makes us reach for the very highest in terms of love and forgiveness, the pursuit of justice and freedom and peace between people. I found Christ often there because I needed him – it is not easy to love, always, in such a tough environment where people have various reasons for needing to treat the priest, let alone the female priest, roughly. I met him forcibly there because sometimes at the most difficult moments when all I encountered was hate and rejection he was the only one left teaching me to love and giving me the grace to go on loving. He was, bone of my bone, flesh of my flesh, divine encouragement, an icon of our full humanity in God.

Which is why I am glad to be back for a while, to have a rest in the deepest spiritual sense and to recover my equilibrium (tho I have to say that if much loved members of staff keep leaving at this rate of knots it is going to be some rest ! Before Andrew got appointed as Director of Music there was a moment when I thought I was going to have to learn the organ as well!) and why I am so thrilled on coming back to find this amazing window!

I was so glad that I hadn't read your bit of paper about Jacob's ladder and all that before I started to look at it because the lack of information let my mind go free. And what I saw was glass and metal stretched painfully and with effort beyond their natural shape to form a new space – like humanity stretched beyond its usual confines to contain God in Christ, so that we following him may as a church together and as ourselves stretch so that the space of divine love in us grows beyond our wildest imaginings so that in us – in our new shiny spaces, in our sometimes harsh angles and empty lines of seats and in our very souls that which had grown old may be seen to be being made new and that which was ruined and ugly with desolation be seen to be raised, returning to their origin and imprint, the image and reflection of the love of God.

The writer of the letter to the Thessalonians knew that we have all the encouragement we need – “God has destined us not for anger and punishment but for gaining salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ who died for us, so that whether we are awake or asleep we may live with him”.

Ours now the task of sharing that encouragement with one another so that all may be made new. I am so glad to be with you for the next stage of the journey for it contains the tension at the heart of Christianity – how to serve Christ in the stranger which has for so long been the distinctive call of St Martin- in –the-Fields while using these new liturgical and social and pastoral spaces to have the confidence to grow inwards and discover his being among us, between us and within us. We need encouragement not only to be St Martin, the godly soldier and bishop but also to know ourselves to be the beggar, utterly in need of encouragement and from the position of that knowledge and that need able to share Christ's life. Amen.