

Sunday 4 October: Seventeenth Sunday of Epiphany

Harvest Festival and finding spiritual resources in an environmental catastrophe

Readings: Jeremiah 17.7-8; Psalm 65.1-5; Matthew 6.19-end

It's an odd place to begin the sermon at Harvest Festival but I want to take you with me into Pentonville Prison. I went a few weeks ago to see a man I have known since he was a teenager 30 years ago. He gets in touch with me when he's in trouble, and one way or another he has been in some pretty big trouble. He looked awful and was struggling on the edge of recurrent mental illness. He had lost a lot of weight and he found it difficult to concentrate. He told me that he had been falsely accused and shouldn't be there. He didn't trust his lawyer because he didn't take any interest in him or ask the right questions of the Police. He wouldn't eat the Prison food because he knew that the inmates working in the kitchen spat in it for the prisoners who were sex offenders. He had done it himself when he had been in prison before. I listened for about 40 minutes and then I snapped. I said, with what I like to think was uncharacteristic firmness, "David, you are not able to change the fact that you are here. You might think it's unjust but you had better accept it. The only lawyer you will get is the lawyer you have got and you had better do all you can to make him the best lawyer in town for you. The only food you are going to get is the food you are given. Even if it has been spat in, it's not going to kill you, so you had better eat it because otherwise you are going to be hungry and make yourself ill."

We were in the chapel so I told him to pray like the Psalms. Once you've got over shouting at God or the system for putting you in this terrible place, you'd better accept it and then you can start to think about how you can use the time and the opportunities so that when you get to court you have got yourself thinking straight and can make the best possible case. And you can try to work out how to make good use of the medical help, the education opportunities of being in prison, and the chapel. I know it must be hard but try each day to find things to give thanks for. In the end, it's the only way to live and I added the prayer used by Alcoholics Anonymous.

"God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change
The courage to change the things I can change
And the wisdom to know the difference."

It was a sort of turning point in our conversation and he has written since to say that he is trying but as so often when a reaction comes out with more force than you're expecting you realise that what's been triggered is something inside and you're talking to yourself at least as much as to the other person.

Harvest Festival has become a complex occasion. Simple gratitude that the labour is done and the harvest safely gathered in gave way in the 1960's to a deep awareness that we live in a world in which many are hungry. Harvest Festival became the occasion to pray for justice and fair shares. As today, churches often gave the day's collection to a development charity. Earlier in the week we thought we might give today's collection to the emergency appeal for the East African drought. We thought you might give more having seen the terrible pictures that have been on TV. By the weekend it could have been for the earthquake of Sumatra or tsunami victims of Samoa. I am glad we stayed with our original intention to support the Diocesan appeal for water projects in Mozambique, where our Diocese is linked. Development aid is a constant need, not just an emergency and this link with our Harvest thanksgiving reminds us of the

relationships in which we know we are very blessed and in our thanksgiving we can be generous to others.

So a third theme has been added to Harvest Festival in addition to thanksgiving and the quest for justice and fair shares. It started in the 1980's as stewardship of the earth's resources but it has hardened into a concern for what increasingly looks like an environmental catastrophe. A self-imposed judgement has begun, affecting the poorest and most vulnerable first. A deep change of heart is needed in the way we live consuming fossil fuels that have taken millions of years to lay down and spilling the waste all over the planet. Part of our anxiety is that we do not yet have the personal and corporate will to make the change.

There's no point complaining about our circumstances. We had better accept this is where we are and use the wisdom God has given us to make the changes that are needed. The pattern of my conversation with David in prison provides a model that is transferable and might be helpful in unlocking the resources Christianity has to help us.

1. Gather the facts, get the information.

From 25th October, in preparation for the Copenhagen Summit in December there is going to be an exhibition of photographs by Mark Edwards called 'Hard Rain' in the courtyard around St Martin's. These images are a shocking account of what we have done to the planet and to one another. They are not just to scare us but judgement leads to repentance and to action. It is part of the answer to how we will find the energy to change our habits of consumption, to engage with new and smarter technology and to deal with our waste better.

2. Live with reverence and thanksgiving

Christianity has been criticised by environmentalists for that view in the creation stories that puts human beings on top of the creation and encourages us to have dominion over it all. There's another strand which asserts that our place within creation is only found in relation to God. "The earth is the Lord's and that is in it." (Psalm 24.1) Remind yourself how beautiful the earth is and give thanks for it. We need to relearn our place in creation with modesty and treat God's creation with reverence. Rather like in the children's game, scissors, paper, stone, thanksgiving overcomes anxiety and helps us to act in ways that are fitting rather than dominant.

3. Become active citizens rather than passive consumers.

We need to move from thinking about ourselves primarily as customers and consumers. A journalist on the radio yesterday said that voters want to know from politicians, 'what's in it for us?' I hate the way the local Council refer to me as a 'customer'. I am not, I am a citizen! As citizens we participate in the political process and have a shared responsibility for finding better solutions. For example, the Diocese of London is carrying out a range of projects including area environmental audits on energy, carbon, water and waste; aiming at a minimum 20.12% saving by 2012.

4. Live with hope.

It sounds paradoxical, but the Gospel says, "Do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink." Strive for God's kingdom and everything else will be given you. That is what will free us to act creatively and with energy. Work out what to set your heart on. Worship is what puts us in a right relationship with God and schools us to live by what we hope for. There's no need to be anxious about today but set your heart on the things of God. It's what puts an end to selfish preoccupation and helps to make us one with God and with one another and a

right relationship with creation. Love, truth, justice hope... lead us to a right care of the earth for the good of all.

Today is St Francis' day. Francis is the Christian saint who most embodies a joy and reverence in creation. He is also a saint who carried on his body the stigmata, the wounds of Christ. It is the way of life to which we are all called, the way of the cross, the way of love and justice and the way of hope.