

8 July 2007: Sea Sunday

Sea Sunday, floods and the Bishop of Carlisle

Readings: Galatians 6.(1-6),7-14; Luke 10.1-11,16-20

Our second son, Tim, passed his degree exams with flying colours and has landed the perfect job, as a life guard for the summer on Brighton beach. Helen and I went to visit him at work yesterday and sat on the pebbles looking out to sea, perfect preparation for Sea Sunday at the Admiralty's parish church 'on tour'. I love being by the sea, on the edge of a different sort of existence. Yesterday, on the south coast it was quite rough. The powerful waves surging into the shore meant hardly anyone swam. There's a different sense of time as the waves crash in: geological time on a scale hinting at eternity. For the Hebrews, and therefore in our Old Testament, the sea represented chaos, and the dry land the order God created out of the chaos.

The power and devastation of water in flood these last few weeks has vividly reminded us of this Biblical and theological image. Not surprisingly, church leaders have attempted to do theology with this experience. The Archbishop of York's pastoral empathy and sense of urgency on behalf of the people of Hull contrasted with the extraordinary remarks from the Bishop of Carlisle about the floods being God's judgment. He got himself into deep water by saying,

“We are reaping the consequences of our moral degradation, as well as the environmental damage that we have caused. We are in serious moral trouble, because every type of lifestyle is now regarded as legitimate....The sexual orientation regulations are part of a general scene of permissiveness. We are in a situation where we are liable for God's judgment, which is intended to call us to repentance.”

The Diocese of Carlisle provided a spokesman, as it happens a former student of mine, to fish the bishop out of the brink by saying that what the bishop meant was, “Our lack of respect to the environment was mirrored by our lack of respect for each other and towards God”. Actually, that's a good point and the sort of wisdom that was in that last section of St Paul's letter to the Galatians read as this morning's epistle: God is not mocked and we reap what we sow.

But what the bishop actually said raised much more troubling questions about how God acts in the world and why the people of Hull and Toll Bar in particular were singled out for the consequences of our moral degradation whilst in Old Compton Street the waters did not rise and people sheltered from the heavy rain in the cafes and bars.

It's not been a good week for the Bishop of Carlisle. This week's Church Times carries an article by him headlined, “Why I blessed a nuclear submarine”. Now this *is* the stuff of Sea Sunday! The bishop said, “Church of England bishops are bishops for the whole community”. The BAE shipyard at Barrow is an important employer in his diocese and those who serve in the Navy do so on our behalf. They need our prayers. He used an argument increasingly deployed in support of nuclear energy, that the submarine's use of nuclear energy for its propulsion is in fact green. It will not need to be refueled. He admitted that had the submarine, *Astute*, been carrying nuclear warheads he may not have been able to bless it; and that there is a problem about, “the overall level of resources devoted to defence rather than more life-enhancing priorities”. He side-stepped

this by saying it is a political problem rather than something specifically for ship-builders and the Navy, one for all of us to work out through the democratic process. He concluded that, "Since the Church supports the armed forces with Chaplains it would be strange for a bishop to act prophetically and arbitrarily if he believed that a particular part of their equipment was too expensive."

It's not often you read something so tightly packed with the moral dilemmas of our age, and to a degree I sympathise with him. He has got himself into a muddle but he's not alone in that. I wish he had asked more searching questions whether the possession of the submarine makes peace more or less possible and exactly what he as bishop was supporting and encouraging by blessing it. Nevertheless, I accept that Christians have different views and the bishop had engaged with the moral dilemmas we all face, not just if we are employed in the shipyard at Barrow or in the Royal Navy.

Where the bishop really gets into trouble is when the stories of God's judgment through the floods and his blessing of a nuclear submarine are put together. Why does he say that the work of those in the nuclear armaments industry is 'courageous' whilst the lives of people physically attracted to the same sex who are breaking new ground personally and socially in a responsible kind of way are morally degenerate to the point of bringing down God's judgment on us all? Why does 'the whole community' of his diocese uncritically include the BAE shipyard, whilst in our parish he thinks we can only minister conditionally to the substantial gay minority? Why is he being Biblical just because the Scriptures have no mention of nuclear submarines when Christians who want to affirm loving faithful same-sex relationships are not? Crudely, why can he legitimately bless a nuclear submarine when he says I can't bless a same sex couple who love each other?

Time to look at today's readings.

Jesus sent out seventy ahead of him, or some manuscripts say seventy-two. Either there's a point being made here that Jesus was like Moses and appointed seventy elders "to bear the burden of the people" with him. Or, being the most Greek of the four Gospels, seventy-two would have emphasised the Gospel is for the whole world, there being seventy-two nations in the Greek world. Both numbers suggest an inclusiveness to the mission.

They were sent in pairs: travel together, don't assume you know it all, learn from one another and be supportive. As Paul wrote to the Galatians: restore one another in gentleness... bear one another's burdens.

Travel light and with striking simplicity. Don't clutter yourself up with inessentials.

And when you arrive somewhere new, "say, 'Peace to this house'. If anyone is there who shares in peace, your peace will rest in them; but if not, it will return to you." Blessings like this are not given in such a way as to create something from nothing; they invoke what is already there, given by God, perhaps previously unknown but there to be called out. "Peace be upon this house".

I worry when there are verses cut out for the sake of the public reading of scripture. In our Gospel reading today we jumped from verse 11 to 16 of Luke chapter 10. You are too delicate to hear these verses of judgment, but given the public discussion of theology this week I want us to hear what Luke says. All that God has done for us should lead us to repentance but it was more

tolerable for Sodom and Gomorrah than for that town which rejects God's peace. Judgment for us all, then, but *relatively* good news for Sodom and Gomorrah traditionally associated with the gays!

The words I like most in today's readings are from the end of the Epistle to the Galatians. We have been reading through Galatians for the last few weeks and now at the end Paul himself has taken up the pen: "See what large letters I am writing in my own hand!" He isn't as accomplished as his professional scribe. In his own naïve hand he writes with urgency and directness, saying what he really wants them to hear and remember:

"It is for those who want to make a good showing in the flesh that try to compel you to be circumcised [and they don't all keep the law themselves]... May I never boast of anything except the cross of Christ, by which the world has been crucified to me and I to the world. For neither circumcision nor uncircumcision is anything; *but a new creation is everything!* As for those who follow this rule – peace be upon them, and mercy, and upon the Israel of God."

As we face the moral dilemmas and challenges of our age, which feel very urgent, we need to work together traveling in pairs, and as a group; expressing things as best we can, charitably and graciously; and keeping focused on what matters. With the floods and moral dilemmas we all face, if we are to avoid being at sea, keep focused on the cross of Christ. It sets everything in proportion and holds us in the place of truth and love. It is because of the cross of Christ that in the resurrection we, like the seventy or seventy-two disciples, return home rejoicing and having conquered our demons.