PENTECOST 2015

I must start with an anecdote about sermon length. On Thursday a Roman Catholic student was to give a sermon in Oriel Chapel. I said to one of my RC St Hilda’s students, I hope it’ll be a short one. ‘Ah, Roman Catholics can be long-winded,’ she replied. ‘They say the first five minutes for the congregation, the second five minutes for the priest, and the third five minutes for the devil.’

Some of my clergy friends were telling me last week how difficult it is to preach about the Ascension and that they resorted to speaking of the coming of the Spirit, rather jumping the gun. But I find it difficult to speak about the Spirit because I don’t really know what the Spirit is – fire, truth, intoxicating excitement, glossolalia, the ghostly presence of God? I have lots of ideas about God, and a strong picture of Jesus from the gospels, but, despite the Acts of the Apostles, which is sometimes called the *Gospel of the Holy Spirit*, I struggle with the Spirit.

I expect you’ve heard about the non-appointment of the Bishop of Oxford. Given three shortlisted candidates, the Crown Appointments Committee failed to agree on any one of them. Which means that the whole process has been put on hold until next year and there is unlikely to be a bishop in post until October 2016, meaning there will have been an interregnum of two years.

This administrative absurdity is translated by our national and local leaders into spiritual church speak. The Archbishop of Canterbury says: ‘I have every confidence in our senior staff to continue to work with God in growing the Church in this Diocese. We continue to commit the process into God’s hands.’

Another familiar phrase often adduced is: ‘we must discern where the Spirit is leading us.’ Oh, really? Isn’t that simply hiding the fact that we disagree and can’t make up our minds and need a better appointments system? And, by the way, don’t we live in an age of transparency and freedom of information? Shouldn’t we be told why the Appointments Commission failed to agree and have the opportunity to comment on the process?

Furthermore, if God is behind this process, deciding who should be the next Bishop, then God must also be responsible for all the other appointments in the Church of England; and although he has made some wonderful appointments he has made some pretty dodgy ones too. I thought we had grown out of this providential view that God is up there in the background pulling the strings, rather like Winston Churchill in the underground war rooms in Whitehall.

Now, I fear you might think I’ve just grown too cynical and negative - and there’s a but coming - but something quite important is a stake here. The Church of England has traditionally located authority in Scripture, Tradition and reason: that is to say the religious truth revealed in the Bible, the Church’s theological reflection on that, and our rational evaluation of those claims. Reason is the faculty that allowed for John Henry Newman’s exposition of the development of doctrine: as successive generations reflect on the historic claims of Christianity, reason allows for change and revision, or development, as he called it. The Methodist Church adds another dimension to Scripture, Tradition and reason – and it is ‘experience’. Experience, I think, is different from reason. Reason is a deductive process, but experience is visceral - you feel it in your guts. And if a religious or theological claim defies all your experience, then it has to be questioned, however sacrosanct that claim had seemed to the Church in the past. Take, for example, the wakeup call received overnight by the Catholic Church in Ireland on gay marriage.

This is the problem so many contemporary people run up against when they feel attracted to the Christian religion. The attraction itself is experiential and instinctive; the hunch that Christianity is on to something good ethically, communally and in terms of understanding the shape and meaning of things. But too often when you dip your toe into the water you find an institution bogged down by an inability to know what past ideas to hold on to, and what to discard, or to know theologically what clearing of the attic is acceptable and appropriate.

When you look back to the origins of our faith, to the liberating story of the Israelites, you find a providential God who chooses his people and leads them from captivity in Egypt to a land flowing with milk and honey, through many a trial and tribulation on the way. It’s a model the Church cannot throw off, even though it’s not true to our contemporary experience.

The contemporary discourse/paradigm is of astro-physics and knowledge of a different kind of universe from the ancients; there might be fear of the vastness of space, but there is much less fear, for example, of ghouls and goblins hidden in dark places, less experience of good spirits and bad spirits.

On the radio yesterday a film critic was saying that the best films in sci-fi and computer generation address universal themes: do you think he’ll leave his wife? No, he never will. Will the oppressed man win out in the end? Will the girl have an abortion? Will justice win the day? Youth and age.

Just like vaulting ambition, or self-destruct jealousy, or greedy daughters, or the toppling of kings by young pretenders, or an outnumbered platoon holding the bridge represented on stage - all experiences we can identify with. And in the NT, will the child tipped to be king ever be crowned? Can the pacifist messiah actually triumph over the cruelty of the state? Can sin be forgiven? Can humankind be redeemed from their own folly? Will the angels take Christ from the Cross? They never will. But who could predict the weird triumph of new life and energy called the resurrection?

Speak of these things in the Church and we will sit up and take notice, because it speaks to our experience.

Alan has been holding a series on that most repressed and unfashionable emotion, anger. And we’ve had two superb presentations. Gradually people are learning what anger is, but also coming to understand their own anger – something which hitherto has seemed as unspeakable as your sexual fantasies. Someone said that anger was like a wild horse rearing up inside her and each person around the table said, yes, it feels like that to me too. So we are frightened lest anger gets out of hand, but we also know that anger drives us with the same chemical survival mechanism that motivates attack and flight.

One way of preaching is what I am doing this morning: bringing together the ongoing discussion of a community. Not the attempt of one isolated mind to utter a religious truth, but a reported, corporate reflection. Yesterday, we held a pageant to remember the visit of Elizabeth I to Oxford in 1566, (and a great success it was too) and walking behind the procession along Ship Street, a parishioner and I were reflecting on how the Tudor mind-set was so different from our own. He said to me, ‘You know, the really creative minds think what seems impossible to their contemporaries. Or at least they think how the future can be, rather than how can we keep things the same.’ What a prophetic warning that is to the Church! I was reminded of TS Eliot’s great question in the mouth of J Alfred Prufrock:

‘And indeed there will be time

To wonder, “Do I dare?” and, “Do I dare?”

Time to turn back and descend the stair,

With a bald spot in the middle of my hair —

(They will say: “How his hair is growing thin!”)

My morning coat, my collar mounting firmly to the chin,

My necktie rich and modest, but asserted by a simple pin —

(They will say: “But how his arms and legs are thin!”)

Do I dare

Disturb the universe?

In a minute there is time

For decisions and revisions which a minute will reverse.’

Daring can be recklessness, but it can also be the bravado that derives from anger; anger at injustice, or anger at stupidity, or lazy conservatism. If I’m to give content to the Holy Spirit today, it would be: be creative, think the impossible. The Holy Spirit is the uncomfortable, threatening challenge at the heart of God. Not all of our religion can be consolatory, settling, or calming. Remember Christ’s ‘sword of division’, his be willing to be hit in the face on the other cheek, his upturning of the tables of the money changers. And listen to the Holy Spirit’s question: ‘Do you dare…’