Easter 2016

Most of you know I shall be leaving SMV very soon and this will mean moving house as well. So we’ve begun clearing out the attic and sifting through the memorabilia of thirty years’ history. In fact my wife found a sermon of mine preached in 1969 at St Stephen’s, Rochester Row, on the text ‘Simon, son of John, do you love me?’ (Well, it started strongly but tailed off. We’ve found here that many preachers new to the genre find it difficult to finish well.)

In preparation for my final sermon as Vicar in a few weeks, I’ve been referring back to stuff I wrote in the past and indeed to what was said ten years ago at my twentieth anniversary service.

Professor Keith Ward was the speaker on that occasion and he wanted to affirm the Liberal theological stance for which this place is now well known. He made three points (as every good preacher is supposed to do).

1. Liberal Christians have the freedom to dissent. (And should live together rejoicing in diversity of interpretation.)
2. Liberal Christians have no fear of informed critical inquiry about the sources of their faith and how it’s going to fit in with the society they live in.
3. In ethics Liberal Christians embrace autonomy. By which he meant, they make informed ethical decisions after consultation, after taking advice, but nevertheless taking responsibility for what they decide.

Let’s concentrate just on the second point - about critical inquiry. ‘Part of the liberal tradition is the acceptance of critical inquiry both in science and in history.’ Keith argues that the biblical justification for that is simply the fact that we have four gospels. They’re different. You only have to look at the presentations of Easter. Mark’s Gospel originally had no resurrection stories at all. It ended at chapter 16 verse 8 with the women finding the tomb empty and running away in fear and trembling. John on the other hand has this beautiful story of Mary Magdalen meeting Jesus in the garden and not recognising him until he speaks her name. Luke has the story of the Road to Emmaus, where again Jesus is not recognised until they break bread together in the evening at the end of the journey. And so on.

In Keith’s words, what this illustrates is the fact that ‘you had different perspectives on Jesus set out specifically in the Bible so that we would know that *difference* is part of our faith.’ (Frank Muir speaking at the Oxford Union for the motion: vive la difference. A child goes into the sweetshop to buy a chocolate baby – do you want a little girl baby or a little boy baby, asks the shopkeeper. Thinks. I’ll have a boy baby – because there’s that little bit extra – vive la difference). But back to the NT: you haven’t got a literal, blow by blow, record of Jesus’ life and times and the Jesus of John’s gospel is clearly *very* different, (long speeches: I am the light of the world, I am the shepherd, I am the door, I am the way) whereas in the synoptic gospels, Jesus said, look, don’t even tell anybody that I’m the Messiah. It’s the same Jesus but from different views.

So we have portraits, interpretations, angles, enriching and generative, rather than reductionist. And we are trying to see the present, and our present society, through the lens of the Passiontide story – otherwise there’s not much point telling it. And since the passion is about sin, suffering and redemption it has to be big enough to encompass not just the small things, the peccadillos, but the genocides, the nail bombs, and air crashes as well.

In order to expand our understanding of Passiontide and Easter, on Good Friday some members of the congregation read poems. In the past these have included Philip Larkin’s *Ambulances.*

Closed like confessionals, they thread

Loud noons of cities, giving back

None of the glances they absorb.

Light glossy grey, arms on a plaque,

They come to rest at any kerb:

All streets in time are visited.

All streets in time are visited, because death is the universal condition. Often in a service we hear an ambulance screaming up the High Street.

Or there’s William Blake’s The Tyger 1794

Tyger! Tyger! burning bright
In the forests of the night,
What immortal hand or eye
Could frame thy fearful symmetry?

In what distant deeps or skies
Burnt the fire of thine eyes?
On what wings dare he aspire?
What the hand dare seize the fire?

And what shoulder, & what art,
Could twist the sinews of thy heart?
And when thy heart began to beat,
What dread hand? & what dread feet?

What the hammer? what the chain?
In what furnace was thy brain?
What the anvil? what dread grasp
Dare its deadly terrors clasp?

When the stars threw down their spears,
And watered heaven with their tears,
Did he smile his work to see?
Did he who made the Lamb make thee?

Why would this poem be chosen for Good Friday? Because the creation of the streamlined killing machine, the tiger, symbolises the problem of evil. How can a loving, powerful creator God allow suffering in the world?

The poem has the rhythm and clank of a blacksmith’s hammer hitting the anvil. But what I like most is that it consists entirely of unanswered questions! This is no sceptical modernist writing, though. It is a visionary Christian poet of 225 years ago.

The fact of these questions is not a declaration of doubt, but a positive readiness to challenge God with an essential paradox of religion (and also of life) that violence and passivity are part of the human condition and part of the physical creation itself. The force of gravity enables life, yet it is a major threat to life. God is in the heat and hazard of the forge as well as in the still small voice of calm.

It’s a similar insight to that expressed by Pascal when he wrote of God: You would not be seeking me if you had not already found me. When we question our faith, we are not denying Christ, but looking for different perspectives. It’s like those wonderful moments in Alan Bennett’s ‘The History Boys’ when the maverick teacher, Hector, makes his scholarship class think for themselves, defend their assertions, and see history in a much wider, interdisciplinary context.

It’s no accident that William Blake asks whether he who made the Tiger also made the Lamb, and in the text written in Blake’s own hand Lamb has a capital letter, referring to the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. Did he who made the rapier thrust also make self-giving love? Did he who made self-giving love also let the soldiers drive nails through his own hands?

On this Easter Day, when families come together and children receive chocolate eggs and the boat race will be rowed, we are also confronted with Brussels, suicide bombers, degenerative illness, natural disaster. These tragedies are not suddenly neutralised or wiped out on Easter morning. The story doesn’t work if it’s sentimental or unrealistic or kitsch. And if the Church ever suggests that if you had sufficient faith everything would just suddenly be alright, you know you are being lied to and you realise why you can’t entirely trust it.

Amongst the many messages of defiance chalked on the ground of Brussels’ Place de la Bourse, was one which read, ‘Hope is our resistance’. That seemed to me part of what the story of the resurrection is trying to say. And when you think about it, the aftermath of the Brussels’ bombing bears comparison with three men being thrashed to within an inch of their lives before being nailed to a cross and, in the case of two of them, having their legs smashed with successive cuts of a sword until their bodies sagged and they suffocated to death.

The messages chalked on the pavement said something similar to what motivated the first Christians in the days of resurrection appearances before the ascension: our spirits will not be overcome; there is surely more to life than this; hope is our resistance; we still have faith, we still have hope, and we shall find the charity to transform our bitterness into love.