Sermon for 19th in Ordinary Year C

Readings: Isaiah 1:1, 10-20; Hebrews 11:1-3, 8-16; Luke 12:32-40.

i

Churchill once said of his Labour opponent, Clement Atlee: “He’s a modest man, with much to be modest about”; and described him as a “sheep in sheep’s clothing”; and again regaled his listeners with – “One day an empty taxi arrived at 10 Downing Street, and when the door was opened Atlee got **out**.” You can have a good laugh with Winston by searching for his famous insults and put-downs on the internet. But I suspect they wouldn’t be so funny if you were the target, but with his sharp wit and keen political senses (most of the time) Churchill made a career of telling people exactly what he thought of them.

Isaiah must have been from the same mould. He started his prophetic career by comparing Jerusalem with Sodom and Gomorrah! What an insult to the citizenry of God’s holy city!

He then piles on the agony by denouncing their sacrifices in the temple as “meaningless offerings”, “detestable” to God who “hates” their festivals and turns his back on their prayers. Isaiah lacks the Churchillian humour, but has all the venom.

He demands they reform their ways: “Seek justice, encourage the oppressed, defend the orphan and the widow” – that is care for the weakest in society (v17). Faith and religious observance mean nothing unless they affect the way in which we live our lives. Religion must influence the every-day choices we make and how we treat others. This message is as old as the hills, yet forever new.

Then the promise of transformation interrupts Isaiah’s invective - their sins, which are as scarlet as blood, will be washed as white as snow. But this comes with a challenge: choose which it shall be! Obey – and you will prosper and eat the best of the land; rebel – and you’ll be the ones that are eaten – by the sword (v19).

Judah, a tiny city state sandwiched between Assyria to the north, Egypt to the south and the embryonic power of Babylon to the east represented a tasty morsel to more than one giant neighbour.

Faith is not just about how you do business, or care for the weak and vulnerable. Faith underpins the whole of society. Faith is far too important to be discounted as nothing more than a private affair, and the Church no more than a hobby. Nations fall or rise according to what they believe.

Nations based on the belief that Jews are vermin, or white people are superior, or slavery is a necessary evil, or gays should be thrown off tall buildings, or failure to agree with the Glorious Leader should result in death are very different from those societies that don’t believe those things. It may sound trite to point out such a self-evident truth – but so many countries today are acting as if faith no longer matters – and they kick away the pillars on which their societies based on human rights, democracy, decency and tolerance have been created.

Destroy the pillars of faith that certain choices are eternally good – that people have to answer one day to an Almighty God for the choices they have made – and you wonder just how long a society will be able to live off the last vestiges of the faith that first promoted such values.

Most cars can run for quite a way when the fuel gauge reaches “Empty” – but there comes a time when an engine cannot run on fumes alone.

Western societies are the richest they have ever been in terms of material wealth, but they lack strength and resolve to stand against some of the more virulent philosophies of some of the most disturbing regimes we have seen for generations.

Peace, democracy and human rights do not fall from the trees; they have been attained through struggle and sacrifice because people were prepared to suffer for the sake of them – because they believed they were following a good and noble cause.

It takes a similar degree of faith at times to hold on to these things – yet the West mocks the faith of their founding fathers. If Isaiah is right – one day there might be a day of reckoning.

ii

The world is a hostile place for the Gospel. Sin opposes God’s will in every human heart. It has always been difficult to live according to the Gospel we proclaim because we try to do so in such inhospitable conditions. It has always been the easier option to go with the flow of the world – which means looking after oneself first, building up a sizeable material buffer against the unpredictable hand of fortune, and allowing the soul to doze off to sleep.

It is disturbing that in those countries where Christianity remains strong the highest levels of corruption are to be found. As the West knows through experience, it takes centuries for the principles of the kingdom of God to impact deep-seated issues such as racism, sexism, slavery, political corruption and social exclusion. The fight has to be taken up again by each generation, but the world needs to see progress for the Church to retain any credibility.

Nietzsche’s cutting remark still hits its mark: “Better songs would they have to sing for me to believe in their saviour: more like saved ones would his disciples have to appear to me” (*Also Sprach Zarathustra).*

Luke applies the “little flock”, not as Mark’s Gospel to the disciples who are about to be abandoned for a short while by the crucifixion of their Lord, but as the universal experience of all followers of Jesus.

Luke is saying: We live in a world hostile to the life of faith; do not be afraid (Luke 12:32).

Believers should be pleased to receive the blessings of the kingdom which God has promised (v32) and not rely on amassing worldly wealth as their safeguard in life. From this point, Luke goes on to talk about selling all possessions, giving to the poor and of obtaining a purse that will not wear out, or be stolen by a thief or eaten by moths (vv33-34).

Matthew does not include “selling all possessions” in his version of this teaching in Matthew 6:19-24, but keeps it as advice for all believers, whereas Luke’s reference to selling off possessions is clearly aimed at the wealthy, one of Luke’s favourite targets.

Selling off all one’s possessions has never been applied to all Christian believers – it has always been a free choice for those who felt it would assist their faith journey; Jerusalem’s pooling of resources in Acts 5 prefigures later monastic life, to a degree, but it was never a universal expectation. For a few it may have been not just helpful but essential – such as the Rich Young Ruler in Luke 18:18-30.

Whether Luke’s prod to the ribs of the wealthy at this point is original or not, the essential message is clear: do not rely on worldly wealth as your saviour in life. Spiritual treasures, one of which is giving alms to the poor, are more important than any gold in your pocket.

By keeping focus on the kingdom of God and relying on God’s goodness rather than seeking the false protection of money, the believer will be ready to serve God. The faithful, trusting believer will be like the servant with clothes girded up ready either for work, or for a journey. Perhaps it is pushing the parable too far to suggest that being ready for a journey is a metaphor for being ready for death.

Luke’s passing reference to keeping lamps burning into the night to be ready for the wedding banquet (vv36-38) picks up a theme more fully developed in Matthew’s parable: *The Ten Virgins* (Matthew 25:1-13). This clearly does have eschatological overtones with its oblique reference to the Messianic banquet, but essentially makes the same point: Do not fall asleep on the job. Do not succumb to the false securities of this world. If you are a follower of Christ – live like one.

iii

*The Letter to the Hebrews* spells out what is needed to be able to live like a follower of Christ in this world; quite simply it is faith:

Now faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see (Hebrews 11:1).

Faith underpins our understanding of the whole universe and everything that transpires within it:

By faith we understand that the universe was formed at God’s command, so that what is seen was not made out of what was visible (Hebrews 3:3).

Faith dictates that we cannot ever settle for a vision of life in which this material world could ever be sufficient for us. The fabric of the cosmos is a spiritual as well as a physical reality, with God as its source, its centre, its beginning and its end.

Living as if this world is all there is, epitomises the very antithesis of faith – as Paul once said:

If only for this life we have hope in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied (1 Cor 15:19).

*Hebrews* continues by commending to us examples of patriarchal faith. Abraham not only left his home for a new land, “even though he did not know where he was going” (v8); but the Christian author recasts Abraham’s faith in the new Christian mould by adding:

…he lived in tents, as did Isaac and Jacob, who were heirs of the same promise. For he was looking forward to the city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God…they were longing for a better country – a heavenly one (Hebrews 11: 9-10 &16).

The faith we require in order to live in this world without conforming to it, is the sort of faith Abraham exemplifies. Such faith is not the faith of the hobby-Christian, or the reaching out of a soul in a moment of terror, but faith that consistently sees the whole world and every event in this cosmic context of the kingdom of God.

Such a faith transforms the world.

The loss of such a faith is equally transforming – as Isaiah warned his hearers eight centuries before Christ.

When we measure our faith against that of Abraham, it feels to me uncomfortably close to Churchill’s assessment of Atlee:

One day an empty taxi arrived at 10 Downing Street, and when the door was opened the Church got out.

**Rev Dr Trevor Hoggard**

**July 2015**