Sermon for 7th on Easter Year C(2)

Readings: Isaiah 44:1-8; Luke 24:44-53

i

I was living in Germany when the Berlin Wall came down. It was unbelievable at the time. I had been across to the old East Germany a couple of times previously and knew at first-hand how suspicious they were at the border, how tight a grip the state had over the population. I met business men who had had businesses confiscated for being “too indifferent to the Party” and children of Methodist ministers denied access to university because of their family background. I preached to a congregation routinely visited by plain clothes police to check out what was being said.

At that time we in the NATO forces were still practising for a Russian invasion of the West. Then the Wall came down and everything changed. Within a few months we were crossing the old iron curtain and going on holiday in the former DDR. The rules of the game had been changed and all our expectations about the future of Europe were thrown over. It was an exciting, even if somewhat confusing time. Only in the last year or two has Putin turned the clock back and reinstated some of those old fears and assumptions.

Big change has come elsewhere too of course and not been as propitious as the fall of the Berlin Wall. Saddam Hussein’s Iraq has still not found its new self and ISIS threatens its geographical and political integrity. Libya was freed from Gaddafi to be plunged into political disintegration. And so the stories multiply.

Isaiah of Babylon in our first reading today faced the fall of the Berlin Wall sort of upheaval. The destruction of Jerusalem in 597BC shook the Jewish faith to its foundations. How could God allow such a catastrophe to come about? Had God abandoned Israel forever? Had the covenant promise to Abraham that he should become a blessing to all the families of the earth come to naught?

Yet suddenly, all that gloom, doubt and despair was blown away as Cyrus the Persian defeated Babylon and very soon would set the exiles free to return to Jerusalem.

Isaiah reassures them in this chaotic and confusing time that it all made sense. They should not think that their good fortune was an arbitrary act of fate any more than they should believe their misfortune to be so. Despite the apparent contradiction – Isaiah said both Exile and Return made sense because both were in fulfilment of God’s plan. They were not at the mercy of any other rival Babylonian or Persian gods, because there is only one God, the God of Abraham.

And God is not fickle or weak or confused. It all unfolds, says Isaiah, like a great plan “from the beginning to the end of time” (Isaiah 44:7). From the beginning, the Lord has created them and helped them and loved his chosen people and God promises that one day their dreams of fulfilling their destiny will come true.

One by one the nations will say, “I am the Lord’s” and come and join them (Isaiah 44:5). This is possible because God is God and there is no other.

Jesus uses the same argument in Luke 24 to reassure the bewildered disciples.

Jesus traces the story from Moses, through the prophets and psalms to himself. The important thing he is trying to demonstrate is that God has been utterly reliable and consistent and therefore the radically new thing God has done through him can be trusted and the commission of the Church can be taken as the long-term and dependable mission of the Holy Spirit.

It is important that God is not seen as capricious or inconsistent in how He has transformed the religion of the Jewish people, bringing the old ways of the Pharisees and the Temple priests to a halt and establishing a whole new way of being the true children of God.

Only if you think the story is dependable will you commit life and limb to joining the Church. The first Christians had to justify why this radically new understanding of their Jewish tradition did not make God unreliable and inconsistent by showing how it all makes sense of their past history, even if they now have to see their past in a new light.

They also had to affirm that this was not a stop-gap policy; Jesus wasn’t just another prophet and the one to follow would change everything again, but that this was God’s definitive Word to the world. The owner of the vineyard has sent a string of other representatives in the past, but now he has sent his son. This is it. Accept it or reject it, but this is it.

*In all his wisdom and insight God did what he had purposed, and made known to us the secret plan he had already decided to complete by means of Christ. This plan, which God will complete when the time is right, is to bring all creation together, everything in heaven and on earth, with Christ as head (Ephesians 1:9-10).*

ii

This foundation in the faith of the patriarchs and prophets forms the basis of Christ’s invitation to the world.

Jesus says that this Gospel must be preached to all nations – for in this way Abraham’s children will bless the earth (Luke 24:47).

There are two chief components to the Gospel message: repentance and forgiveness.

Repentance never sounds like good news to our ears because we think of it in terms of being in trouble, being told off and having to accept punishment. But repentance, metanoia in Greek, really means to **change direction.**

If you are walking towards the edge of a cliff, changing direction is distinctly good news!

The Jewish people were walking towards the edge of a cliff by following more Zionist interpretations of the Messiah which would lead them to confrontation with Rome and inevitable defeat. After the Jewish-Roman War 66-70AD, the Jews who had survived were barred from Jerusalem. Jewish Christians, however, were permitted to return.

The size and nature of the cliff may have changed for today’s world – but the message is still the same. Whether the cliff is environmental Armageddon or economic or geo-political or spiritual, our message to the world remains the same: building a world without God is to build on sand and when the storm breaks, that world will collapse.

The way things are done does not have to continue forever; you, the world, can change direction. We can build a better world. But we must build on the best foundation.

The other chief component to the Gospel is forgiveness. Forgiveness allows mistakes to be acknowledged. Forgiveness removes the humiliation of changing your mind. Forgiveness takes away the sting of admitting others may be right.

Deep, fundamental change such as the world needs today on so many fronts requires the lubrication of forgiveness. Blaming others and apportioning guilt will prevent us turning away from the cliff edge. Longstanding hostilities are not settled without a generous measure of forgiveness and the setting aside of point-scoring, self-justification.

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So the direction has now been set. It starts from Jerusalem and goes to the ends of the earth.

There is one consistent and reliable Gospel to proclaim, it offers a new way for the world and makes that possible and palatable by a rich seasoning of forgiveness.

There is no other god in town, says Isaiah. This is God’s plan. No other way will lead to human fulfilment and it is the Church’s mission to deliver that message to the world.

Jesus does not leave us to this monumental task alone. He promises the “power from above” (Luke 24:49) and then leads us on this pilgrimage.

Jesus led his disciples into Jerusalem from Bethany on Palm Sunday and throughout Holy Week. Resolutely, Jesus led the way to the cross. Now, just as resolutely, he leads his disciples out of Jerusalem and towards Bethany and into the waiting world.

When Augustine of Canterbury turned back in fear from the coasts of Kent in southern England to return to the safety of Rome, Pope Gregory famously sent him back again.

The British had a fearsome reputation for fighting, violence and brutality, but Gregory looked upon the blue-eyed, blond-haired British slaves in the markets of Rome and told Augustine that “they may be called Angles, but they are angels – go to Britannia and win their souls.”

So a reluctant Augustine duly set off again.

When he got there he discovered that Christianity and Christ had got there before him.

The Queen of Kent was already a Christian, and whether Joseph of Arimathea had ever visited England’s shores as the locals claimed or not, Augustine did hear of the first English martyr, St Alban, who had been beheaded for his Christian faith in 303AD, very nearly 300 years before Augustine arrived.

Many besides Augustine have been surprised to go into new places only to discover that God was already there.

There may be much work still to do, as there was for Augustine, but the Holy Spirit precedes the footsteps of the Church. The Holy Spirit touches lives and brings good and holy things into being in many different ways and with many different names, but it is the same Holy Spirit at work.

This is because God has a plan and that plan will not be thwarted. This is God’s world and God’s time. Our task is to catch up with the Holy Spirit that goes before us. We name the name of God and his Son, Jesus, and affirm the goodness and the holiness that the Holy Spirit has already inspired throughout the world.

By our Gospel preaching we put the pieces together to form the whole picture. It is only the Trinitarian God of Father, Son and Holy Spirit that contains the whole truth. It is our task to follow the Spirit out of Church and into the world to bring that which the world still lacks – Jesus Christ.

It is Jesus that we believe makes the picture whole; it is Jesus who makes sense of all that has passed before us; it is Jesus and Jesus alone who guides us to towards the future that God has already prepared for those who will follow his lead.

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