

EVENSONG, ALL SAINTS' 11 October 2009

Looking at the list of preachers in this series, I am aware that my 'views of London' are really very limited compared with theirs. I have only been Vicar of St James' Islington for seven months, having spent eighteen of my twenty five years as a priest in the Northern Province, most recently in Bradford. Instead my experience of London is almost exclusively centred on this Church where I came as a choirboy from rural Cambridgeshire in March 1963, having already heard my vocation to the priesthood within these walls two months earlier; where I was married to Maria by Bishop Michael Marshall in August 1981; where I came in search of French Benediction Music while doing a Liturgy and Music Masters in Leeds and where I celebrated an evening Mass in 2003, forty years on from my first arrival. And, most certainly it was here that I became a life-long student of Liturgy and its ability to bring the people of our day to faith.

Perhaps this sermon should be entitled Ghosts of London. Sitting on the Decani choir benches I watched and listened to the great preachers of the day, whistfully timing the Romanian Patriarch, captivated by Michael Ramsey, wondering whether Cardinal Hume would genuflect and intrigued that John Stott from All Souls didn't wear a dog collar. We sang, with Michael Fleming, the most superb repertoire: Schubert and Mozart, Stanford and Bairstow, Vale and – as tonight – Rachmaninov, as only Margaret Street could. We wore cerise cassocks, tight Eton collars and ate Fuller's chocolates donated by members of the congregation. We were taken to Lord's by Bill Gorse and introduced to Judy Garland by Peter Delaney. We sang the War Requiem at St Paul's, at the BBC and at Covent Garden; we made records with the Purcell Consort – and learned not to be too disappointed when we were thrashed at cricket by the 1st XI of the 200 strong choir school at Westminster Cathedral. As we stood on the balconies of the Cathedral watching them sing Vespers afterwards, we deprecated their harsh singing sound and their ignorance in imagining that there were only 149 psalms! And I was here for the High Mass on Easter Day in 1968 after which the Choir School was closed and the Church lost that unique experience of nurturing 16 resident choirboys who seemed to give the impression that they owned the place!

The style when I first arrived here was extraordinarily formal. John Kenyon the Headmaster of the day would not spare anyone who couldn't turn to left or right with his kind of military crispness. But all that changed on one dark Wednesday evening in 1964 when Fr Kenneth Ross, Vicar here and a liturgical scholar of some note, invited a young African priest to come and celebrate the *Liturgy for Africa*. A nave altar was set up for the first time with a stunning African altar cloth and (spared Latin Prep for once) I watched this quite different approach to the Liturgy, utterly transfixed. He faced us – and even smiled as he greeted us! His presiding that night has remained with me for the past 45 years, and will always do so.

Reading the story of Joshua tonight may well feel light years away from the extraordinary beauty of this place in central London but a little digging reveals an interesting commentary on our present situation for this passage has clearly come under the redactor's blue pencil in a quite fascinating way. To set this passage in context we had already seen the way Joshua was commissioned to take over from Moses as the leader of an increasingly confident nation. Here in chapter 5 we read how Joshua and his army are told how to take the well defended city of Jericho.

What interests me is that, superimposed on this relatively simple story, there is a whole raft of material which has been introduced to ensure that we view this as something far more significant than just another local armed struggle. Before Joshua can engage with the city he receives his own Theophany – not quite as impressive as Moses' in the Burning Bush, and he only meets an angel rather than God himself - but nonetheless he has to remove his sandals for this has become holy ground.

Indeed it doesn't take long before we get the distinct feeling that the basic text about stalking the city has become little more than a vehicle for a major liturgical event. Instead of military tactics we find detailed instructions about the number of days they are to walk, requirement about the sounding of the rams horns, the role of the priests and most particularly, the way in which the Ark of the Covenant was to be carried around the walls, with the repeated use of the number seven.

It is all terribly contrived and hugely stylised; the principle figures are not the poor foot soldiers but the cultic personnel, doing liturgical

rather than military things. And in case we still haven't got the point, the sparing of Rahab and her family follows in that long line of those who are 'saved' by their fidelity to Yahweh, like the Gibeonites in Nehemiah or, better still, the wonderful story of Ruth.

So is that strict adherence to rule and regulation the only way of doing liturgy? Whether in London or in Bradford, the debates rage on: how do we handle the tension in our worshipping life between the formal and the prescribed on the one hand, and the charismatic and the fluid on the other? How do we, as Anglicans in the 21st century, try to engage with the world in which we live by facing up to the paradoxical tensions that these two traditions impose on us?

As I try to settle into parish life in Islington, this debate has become a very live issue. A new style of ministry and certainly a different style of presiding, has brought to the fore a fierce debate. For some, the strength of the London Diocese is that there is an Anglican Church on almost every street corner and people will drift to the one that most meets their needs, even if that means travelling some distance. Margaret Street would not survive if it had not always drawn faithful members from a very wide diaspora indeed. The challenge for rather less illustrious churches like my own is how to retain our true catholicity by balancing the faithful witness of the past with the role of being the Parish Church for all those who live in our packed streets.

Kenneth Kirk, in the Bampton lectures of 1928 (later published as *The Vision of God*) talks about the way in which our liturgy has to speak to both the pagan and the saint within us. By paganism he means *the state of acquiescence or merely professional activity, unaccompanied by a sustained religious experience*. By saintliness he means *all our activities which seek to submit to the claims of Christ*.

Kirk describes how both of these lie within each of us. We all yearn for stability, some sense of repetition, elements of the familiar and those things we have inherited over generations, whether we come away spiritually nourished by them or not. Equally, there is a longing for fresh encounters with God through liturgies which challenge us

to the core, with spiritual wisdom drawn from sources old and new. So, Kirk writes, *by what methods shall (the Church) attempt to secure unity and conformity to her purposes, with a minimum of friction and loss?*

I am not sure it is that simple. For myself, I know I have to balance my love for the profound and hugely uplifting music of this place (mostly on CD I'm afraid these days) while finding myself moved by the restlessness and the challenge of *Fresh Expressions*, with all its fluid and experimental forms. Like Simon Weill, I realise that *today it is not enough to be a saint, but we must have the saintliness demanded by the present moment, a new saintliness, itself without precedent.* We are, with so many who seek to know Christ, left with relatively few markers with which to find our way except our innate sense of the love of God.

Could it be that that my first taste of modern liturgy, the Mass for Africa in 1964 - set within these amazing walls which themselves ring with the legacy of Edward Pusey, Dom Bernard Clements, Cardinal Suenens and, soon, Rowan Williams – is a fairly good paradigm for contemporary Christian dialogue? Can we expand Karl Rahner's vision that all people of goodwill are anonymous Christians – to include those fellow Anglicans with whom we disagree so that all our insights and all our styles really can co-exist in a mature diversity?

If London has a character, I suspect that is what it is – or a least what it should be.