

**Sunday 2<sup>nd</sup> September 2018**  
**Evensong: Trinity 14 (B)**

**Liverpool Parish Church**

**OT: Exodus 12.21-27**  
**NT: Matthew 4.23-5.20**

When we moved to Liverpool four years ago, I barely knew what a ship was. After a childhood in London, where the River Thames is great, but a long way from the suburbs where people live, and coming straight from eleven years of ordained ministry in Birmingham, where the river which formed one of the boundaries to my last parish was about as impressive as turning on the tap in the kitchen, my knowledge was limited. I did, in the meantime, develop advanced skills in punting at Oxford, but a punt isn't quite big enough for an ensign on the back. So it has all been a revelation to me since moving to Liverpool. The Rector of Liverpool does, admittedly, get to experience the more glamorous side of the maritime world, but even with a glass of champagne in my hand, I am confronted with the significance and importance of the sea.

In our reading from Exodus this evening we are given a short extract from the history of Moses leading the Israelites out of Egypt. These are stories that we all know well, and this is partly because of the line from the reading "You shall observe this rite as a perpetual ordinance for you and your children." As Christians, we don't observe the rituals, but we still tell the stories. The Jewish communities are particularly good at keeping these events alive in their faith and living, passing on the stories and the ritual from one generation to another. But it is this sense of 'passing things on' that we sometimes lose. Merchant Navy Day, which we celebrate today, and which we kept with some splendour earlier this afternoon, is not just an act of remembrance for past service, but also a celebration of the continuing place of the sea and the Merchant Navy. Most of our food comes from via the

sea. A surprising amount of our oil and gas comes via the sea. So many things, from cheap plastic toys to the clothes we wear come via the sea. But somewhere in our national life, we have stopped talking about it, and have forgotten that in between trade deals and the supermarket shelf, a large ship has intervened. Growing up in the London suburbs, I can assure you that no one mentioned this!

Passing things on is important, and it is something which our Old Testament forebears took seriously. The oral tradition is something which we are losing fast. In fact this began as soon as we started to write things down: a literate society considers that a task is achieved if it is in ink, but cannot vouch for whether people have read it. Our understanding of the oral tradition is very much shaped by the work of Milman Parry, an American scholar in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. He recorded Serbian peasants reciting oral poetry in structural forms which echoed that of Homer, illustrating how epic poetry could be learned and passed on through the generations. Parry's research, which captured what he thought was the dying embers of the Serbian oral tradition, illustrated how culture and religion can permeate an ethnic or geographical group. He did not live long enough to extend that study to show how print, broadcast, or internet media can bring a halt to the re-generation of poetry and culture, whilst at the same time recording it as a snapshot in time. Culture, literature, and religious practice therefore immediately becomes something historical, even at the moment it is being practised. As with our reliance on the sea, the reality is that we feel that so long as *someone* knows it (or has recorded it), we do not need to know it ourselves.

All of this is a greater threat to the Christian faith than the commonly held challenges of a permissive society, secularization, and relative morality. And, ironically, it is a threat to the

written word as well. Read Donne:

*As due by many titles I resign  
Myself to Thee, O God, first I was made  
By Thee, and for Thee, and when I was decay'd  
Thy blood bought that, the which before was Thine.<sup>1</sup>*

There are more references in this to theology and liturgy than one can even count, but all entirely lost to the ear that has not heard and learned the language of our faith and culture.

Or, the contemporary poet, Alice Walker:

*Did you ever understand this?  
If my spirit was poor, how could I enter heaven?  
Was I depressed?  
Understanding editing,  
I see how a comma, removed or inserted  
with careful plan,  
can change everything.<sup>2</sup>*

The poor in spirit is a phrase we heard in our second reading, not as an academic footnote, but as something which means something to the poet, an African-American feminist who has experienced the poverty of spirit about which she writes.

And this is what Jesus spoke about: his words in the Sermon on the Mount were not an academic reference, but the passing on of God's word throughout generations. The author of the Gospel consciously located his teaching to a mountain to echo back from the past the teachings of Moses from the mountain. Milton Parry discovered that epic poetry was

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<sup>1</sup> Donne, *Holy Sonnet II*.

<sup>2</sup> Walker, *Blessed are the Poor in Spirit*.

shaped to be passed on. What we now call Homeric Ring Composition is a selection of markers within a text which enable the teller to frame a story in a defined structure. And in the Beatitudes we have the same: the nine sentences beginning “Blessed” take me back to when I was 11 and at school, and was sent away for homework to learn and be tested on the Beatitudes. These are not sentences to be studied in a book, but sentences to be learned and inhabited.

This is the heart of our faith: not words to be learned, but a space to be inhabited. Like Homeric poetry, our life is marked out by rhythm and repetition, drawing us through the familiar into territory both new and divine. And so every time we encounter the poor in spirit – not just through literature, but on the streets, or through television or the internet – we are brought to a new understanding of Jesus’ words. The broken we see around us are indeed the possessors of the Kingdom; the meek will indeed inherit the earth. And just as we hear the words from our ancestors, so we must pass them on to our descendants.

*Whoever teaches [these commandments] will be called great in the kingdom of heaven.*

Fr Crispin Pailing