

Sunday 16 June 2024
The Third Sunday After Trinity

Liverpool Parish Church

OT: Ezekiel 17.22-24
NT: 2 Corinthians 5:6-10, 14-17
Gp: Mark 4.26-34

The verdict for the upcoming elections is yet to come, but one thing that seems to be true is that party loyalties have not been what they were historically and there is constant shift, which makes some party identities of British politics make less sense to a lot of the electorate. People are not always clear what the arguments are, despite all the debating that goes on. At the same time, the verdict in the Post Office scandal investigation is rightly seen as something of a tragic landmark. The public inquiry has uncovered the danger and exhilaration of words, when some try to say things to hide other motives, or assume that they can say what they wish, not knowing what the consequences are. But this is not the whole picture. Like with public debate and political arguments, what is said in the abstract needs to be concretely defended. Some might say what they like, but they cannot expect to be left unchallenged, or unanswered. Sooner or later the fantasy and ideology filled balloons producing self-justifying systems are going to hit the thorn bushes.

The same thing goes for all of us who like neat historical or religious or philosophical fictions. Our own pictures can be vulnerable to a different kind of language. What settled the picture in the Post office case was the mixture of personal testimony, documentations in word and the building up of a whole world of details, sometimes confused or confusing, but pointing to clear distortions of fact producing a context within which the denials of justice could not be sustained. Say what you like, there are things that words cannot change: the things that are contained in the hurt and blurred recollections of subpostmasters, or in the parenthesis of a forgotten email or letter. This is the kind of language that fantasy or ideology needs to be afraid of.

Words of power cannot bury the truth. In some places, the winners have managed to rewrite the history, where one civilisation takes over another and destroys what came before, suppresses it and buries it deep. But still it so often returns. We might think that we have silenced the dissenting voices, but we carry with us the tell-tale traces of what we have tried to deny. Buried truth finds its way in from the margins, from beneath the surface.

Our readings today have something to do with this. Biblical commentators often remark on the routine nature of the parables; they reflect local peasant culture and familiarity. To talk of a cedar tree growing from a branch, as Ezekiel does, or of seeds secretly falling on the sides and the small mustard seed, sounds in the first instance like what Palestinian Jewish peasants were routinely familiar with. Jesus speaks of the work of God in terms of natural processes such as the growth of a seed. God is not operating with awfully dramatic or

instantaneous interventions against nature, but subtly and slowly from the depths of life. The Kingdom of God is not coming with the political triumph that Jesus' opponents were hoping for. His work is opaque. It's there but we are not good at catching it or seeing it clearly. God's work appears in that missed connection, not in the systems that we are busy defending.

There is then a political dimension to our Gospel reading today too. The same is implied in the parable of the mustard seed; those who expect Jesus to lead a march on Rome will be disappointed. He is offering a redefinition; God, as we read in Ezekiel, has planted a small seed, which will grow into a great shrub. The Romans and the Judaeans will work on silencing it, by burying the truth of Jesus. Crucifixions after all were also quite routine. Pilate is unlikely to have remembered the names of one more agitator. Those who organised the killing of Jesus of Nazareth would not deny that the systems had to ensure that their version counted more. And yet, the very fact that this victim has not been silenced should make us think about all systems that assume it is ultimately possible for words to bury truth.

The crucified and risen Christ says to all of us, believer or non-believer, something about what we could or could not say and how we need to remember where our loyalty lies towards God and other human beings. Paul reminds us, therefore, in our second lesson today, 'From now on, therefore, we regard no one from a human point of view; even though we once knew Christ from a human point of view, we know him no longer in that way. If anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation'. As the historian Tom Holland reminded us here in this church, the death and Resurrection of Christ has transformed Rome forever and that without any force being used. You may have your doubts about the Church's doctrine about who Jesus is; but this historical transformation in itself should make us pause and think about it again.

Our seed is the cross and the crucified that feeds us and helps us grow. But, of course, the Church has across the years used that gift to its own various agendas and purposes. We have had our own versions of the Post Office scandal and we have suppressed others. And that naked suffering is there to judge us all. It judges us; but it is also good news for us because of the one who hangs on it. God's speech to the world is not simply a manifesto or a book; ***it's not words***; it is the body of a victim. This is the sort of language that the systems of the world would like to forget. If we and our politicians would like to hear that word, we need to start learning that language. Because the body on the cross is the one that God lives in, it cannot remain dead. It is indestructible. As God speaks the language of the forgotten, the anonymous sufferers, they are somehow caught up in his life; 'we live because he lives too', says St. Paul today. We are not simply being reminded here of injustice. But more importantly of truth being transformed. This is not just an unbearable memory of the past; it is also waiting for God's future.

We say, therefore, to those who want to be our representatives, we are not simply waiting for empty optimism; instead, we aspire for truthfulness and a journey beyond one specific ideology or system. We long for a government that seeks to nourish strong dignified citizens, a vision for society in which the main concerns are to nourish the strength of the citizens and use that strength for mutual care and service. The arguments ought to be about how this can be secured. That is when trust will follow.

As we gather around the altar this morning, we remember that the life, death, and resurrection of Christ remind us that words alone do not change our memory and do not transform our world. If they did, then the liar and the ideologue or the terrorist would have things their own way. There is another and truer transformations, if the dead man on the cross, the food of our Eucharistic celebration, is also the word and act of the creator of the world himself.

Fr Yazid Said