

## Lent 3, Matins

### Joshua 1:1-19 & Ephesians 6:10-20

#### Father Christopher

Who here is a fan of the hymn 'Onward Christian Soldiers'? It has rather gone out of fashion, being seen as too militaristic. I have however been reading a book by Ian Bradley about Victorian hymns which offers the following perspective:

*Several churches have banished 'Onward, Christian soldiers from their hymn-books, including the Presbyterian Church of the USA in 1989, the United Reform Church in Britain in 1991 and the Anglican Church of Canada at its 1995 Synod. Others, not wanting to lose the tune, have sought to re-write Sabine-Gould's great pilgrim hymn in a more acceptable contemporary idiom. Bishop Derek Rawcliffe produced a version for the twentieth anniversary festival of the Lesbian and Gay Christian Movement at Southwark Cathedral in November 1996 which began 'Onward, Christian homos' and David Wright offered a pacifist version in the aftermath of the Falklands War:*

*Onward, Christian pilgrims / Working hard for peace, / Day by day we're praying / That all wars may cease. / Christ our royal master / Bids us love our foes; / Do good to those who harm us, / And violence oppose!*

*The trouble with this kind of exercise, however worthy and well-intentioned, is that it ignores the message and integrity of the original. 'Onward, Christian Soldiers' is a great poetic expression of the (highly orthodox and biblical) idea of the church militant. It is about moving onward in faith rather than standing still, engaging in the world rather than withdrawing from it, and proclaiming the unity of Christians rather than parading their differences. ... Its language is not so much directly militaristic as carefully and calculatedly allegorical and metaphorical – 'like a mighty army' and 'marching as to war.' It also speaks very directly and positively to those many souls in our fractured and broken society who do have to contend with evil forces and demonic influences.*

Now, I could go on to give a very Spectator/Daily Mail-type diatribe against political-correctness gone mad in the light of this, and I might enjoy that. But it is Lent, and I am going to resist that particular temptation! There is no doubt that in our age many are uncomfortable with the church using militaristic language, even metaphorically. And that instinct comes I think from a good place. And yet, St Paul in our second reading very clearly does precisely that.

*'Put on the whole armour of God, that ye may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil.'*

*'Stand therefore, having your loins girt about with truth, and having on the breastplate of righteousness; ...*

*Above all, taking the shield of faith, wherewith ye shall be able to quench all the fiery darts of the wicked.*

*And take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God:*

*Praying always with all prayer and supplication in the Spirit, and watching thereunto with all perseverance and supplication for all saints.'*

I shall not go too far into the account of ethnic cleansing that we get in Joshua, as God throws out all the native peoples to give the Promised Land to the children of Israel, or the uses to which such passages have been put. Though in that passage the people of Israel are told that they will be prosperous in the land if they will only persevere in keeping the law.

These passages, and Onward, Christian Soldiers, are however all about being strong in the faith, about persisting in resisting temptation; put another way, fighting the good fight. This is not the

way I tend to talk about the faith: from prayer being a difficult discipline for me when I was younger, it now feels more like an invitation for me to be open to. These passages this morning are however a useful reminder that our spiritual life *does* take discipline. And a useful reminder for me I think, that while prayer might be easier for me now, and while I might credit that to my particularly advanced and sophisticated spirituality, it is in fact more likely to be down to the fact that it is part of my job now.

Before being ordained my spiritual director used to give me ever more desperate tips for integrating daily prayer into my life, one of which was to pray every time I passed Big Ben on the number 11 bus into work in the morning. Even that didn't work. I was hopeless at it.

It is not a bad thing to be reminded that living the Christian life can be similarly hard. Yes, we hope it will bring us consolation, but it is about a lot more than just being another form of wellness, to compete with mindfulness and yoga (or pilates, depending on your preference). That is not to do them down at all, but living out our faith is not therapy – it is not just another way to make us feel better about ourselves. It is hard work. There are endless reasons to be diverted, to give in, to be tempted. We are of course forgiven when we do, but that is no reason to give up the struggle which the Christian life is much of the time. You may not think we are tempted by the devil or evil spirits as St Paul did (and I leave that question open – such ideas can be either helpful or harmful, and I do not know whether they are true). And yet, I think we all have things which we do which we would rather not, as St Paul wrote powerfully about elsewhere: drink, the exercise of power over others, gambling, pornography, shopping. We do not have to believe our sins to be high crimes and misdemeanours to want to live a better life, to draw closer to being the person we want to be deep down – using Christian language, to conform our lives to Christ.

Much of the language we hear used, including at the start of this service, sounds so strong in condemning sin, that we are put off even trying to resist doing those things which we know are unhealthy for us. Let us not throw out the baby with the bathwater however. There is room for discipline, and Lent is after all the time to learn and practice it.

I love the prayers of Lancelot Andrewes, that great 17<sup>th</sup> century divine. In many of his prayers he uses the kind of language we have at the start of Matins, about being miserable sinners, and yet there is also much wisdom for us to mine:

*O Thou who didst once say to Thy destroying angel, It is enough (1 Chron. 21.15); stay now Thine hand: hear me now in my prayers and vows, my straits and perils, my infirmities and necessities, my temptations and tribulations. Drive back the concupiscence of gluttony, give the virtue of abstinence; chase away the spirit of fornication, give the love of chastity; extinguish the lust of the world, give poverty of spirit; restrain headstrong anger, kindle in me the spirit of gentleness; remove the sorrow of this world, increase spiritual joy; drive away boastfulness of mind, bestow compunction of heart.*

And in one of my favourite collects from Cranmer's Prayer Book, for the fourth Sunday before Lent, which I have written on a card on my desk (or rather did until I gave it to someone this week), and which I am sure we can all say a hearty Amen to:

*O God, you know us set in the midst of so many and great dangers, that by reason of the frailty of our nature we cannot always stand upright; grant to us such strength and protection as may support us through all temptations; through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord, who is alive and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, **one God, now and forever. Amen***