

St Mary Abbots, Matins

Trinity 18

Nehemiah 8:9-end, John 16:1-11

Father Christopher

I am very glad as an Anglican priest that we don't have to choose our readings every week. I take delight in the roulette wheel of the lectionary, which gives us the readings for every service.

Sometimes links are obvious between the readings, and sometimes there are clear resonances with the issues affecting the congregation you are preaching to, or indeed the nation or the whole world. At other times the readings shine a light on the central tenets of our faith, as with the accounts of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, His Beatitudes, or the key parables, like that of the Prodigal Son. They are a joy to preach on, and rhapsodise over, even if it can be hard to think what you can possibly add to the raw stuff of such beautiful scripture.

Then, there are those *other* times. The times when the passages chosen might seem painfully obscure. And then you have the question in your head of whether to spend half your sermon unpicking the precise origins of an aspect of 2nd Temple liturgical observance, for example, or whether the congregation will by then either be asleep, or too far into rehearsing their shopping list in their head or salivating for their first pre-lunch sherry to hear the rest of what you have to say.

This morning's readings, which are not as obscure as they might have been, do present us with situations which I'm not sure many of us will feel a particular affinity for.

We have the Jewish Festival of Booths, Sukkot, where the children of Israel are commanded to dwell in booths in the feast of the seventh month. *'And they kept the feast seven days; and on the eighth day was a solemn assembly, according unto the manner.'*

Now for those of you who like historical explanations, I'm afraid it's not even clear what the origins of this feast are. Some think the 40 years in the wilderness of Exodus, but there's no mention of the people of Israel living in booths there. It probably comes from the booths which people lived in during the harvest, I read - or then again, maybe the booths people stayed in while on pilgrimage, because of the lack of room at the inns of Jerusalem. So where to go with a sermon on that?

Then we have our gospel reading – you can normally rely on gospel passages at least to give some easy preaching material. But, oh joy of joys, this one is on being persecuted: *'yea, the time cometh, that whosoever killeth you will think that he doeth God's service.'*

Jesus goes on to say that it is necessary for Him to depart, *'for if I go not away, the Comforter will not come unto you; but if I depart, I will send him unto you. And when he is come, he will reprove the world of sin, and of righteousness, and of judgment: of sin, because they believe not on me; of righteousness, because I go to my Father, and ye see me no more; of judgment, because the prince of this world is judged.'*

Aside from most of us not being persecuted, there is so much that is difficult here. Surely we would rather have Jesus with us than have an ill-defined Comforter?

Most of us do not spend our time wanting the world, and the prince of this world, reprov'd and judged for sin. Instead, we might say, why not come and try Evensong and see if the music moves you? That's without trying to get your head around the Comforter reprov'd the world of righteousness, *'because I go to my Father'*, which scholars have struggled for centuries to get any meaningful sense out of.

So I grappled with this morning's readings, desperately trying to find a meaning which would resonate for you. And I confess to you, I could not.

But then it struck me, that these readings remain important for another reason. They may seem obscure to us; they may show us a world which is strange and distant, in which the people portrayed seem to have very little in common with us.

But that I think turns out to be precisely the reason why we need to hear them. Even if we disagree with some of the sentiments expressed, our scripture shows us the full gamut of human experience, across many centuries.

This is particularly so of the psalms: we may rarely fear our neighbour's army, or the water flood overwhelming us, but we enter into those experiences, and countless others, when we say, or hear sung, the emotions of our Jewish forebears who wrote or sung about those experiences.

Precisely why the Jewish people dwelt in booths for this festival may be lost in the mists of time, but in hearing the story read and re-read in our liturgy, we are taken back to the time of re-birth after the people of Israel returned from their Babylonian exile. We are owning their experience in the fifth century BC Holy Land, as they came together again as a people, as Nehemiah led the rebuilding of Jerusalem's city walls, and they rebuilt their community through developing new rituals to remember all that they had been through, whether that was originally the Exodus from Egypt, their experience of harvest or pilgrimage.

In Jesus's words as expressed in St John's gospel, we are reminded of a time when the Church was a renegade sect of Judaism, being expelled from the synagogues, the communities they were from and still held dear.

We may not particularly feel the need for the Holy Spirit as Comforter above all else – or we may do, but they had very good reason to. And we may find the imperative of judgment being executed on the world as being rather distasteful; but then again, we might not feel that way if we too were living secret lives, unable to express our faith publicly for fear of our lives.

The other week Becky spoke of those she knows and has known who risk everything in order to be able to worship. And indeed I am working with an ordination candidate from the persecuted church in the Middle East. Our scriptures may bind us together with those across biblical times who lived very different lives from our own. But they also bind us together with those who continue to live such lives across the contemporary world.

I will now read a list of some of the countries in which our brothers and sisters in Christ face serious persecution today, whether by the state or extremist groups which operate there:

Afghanistan, Algeria, Bangladesh, Chad, Egypt, Indonesia, Iran, Iraq, Malaysia, Nigeria, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, Somalia, Sudan, Syria, Turkey, Yemen, Bhutan, China, India, North Korea, Vietnam, Laos. Becky has more experience than I, but as well as my candidate, I have spoken with bishops in south-east Asia who have received death threats, and one described to me the murder of two of his priests for standing up against corruption. As well as priests who risk their lives to stand up for indigenous land rights in South America.

This is not our experience, but the Church is, we believe, the Body of Christ, across the world and across time. We will be celebrating what we share with them across those bounds in a few weeks' time at All Saints.

It is critical to our identity as Christians – members of the one Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church - not only that we share our beliefs, as set out in the Creeds, and that we share the sacraments, but also that we share the same scriptures. If we are to share the same scriptures, those scriptures will, inevitably, and thankfully, reflect the breadth of human experience and *response* to

that experience, in ways which won't always be comfortable or reflect our own views or experience.

We don't always have to agree with our scripture, which we do believe is divinely inspired - but not that it is simply handed down to us by God. But what we cannot do is simply cast aside what we disagree with or find distasteful. It is instead our duty to hear, to sit with, to grapple with and to give thanks for the full breadth of human experience as expressed in our scriptures, even when – or *especially* when – it seems to contradict our own lived experience or views.

Because it is in that grappling, and in that wrestling with the riches which have been handed on to us, that we might, in time, reach out beyond ourselves, grow in wisdom, and even grow in our knowledge and love of the living God, who created all of us, throughout time and space; and continues to breathe His Spirit into us as we hear, listen and discern His will for us. Amen