

**Sunday 25 February 2024, 2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday of Lent, Choral Matins**

**Hebrews 11.1-16**

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*But now they desire a better country, that is, an heavenly.*

Some of you may remember seeing a film that I count among my favourites: 1984's *Another Country* starring Rupert Everett and Colin Firth. In his film debut, Colin Firth plays a young, idealistic Communist trapped in the stifling conservative environment of an English public school- a thinly disguised Eton College. His only real friend, played by Rupert Everett, is similarly stifled by his school. Though not a Communist, he is gay and therefore lives on the periphery of a staunchly masculine, and militaristic, society. Whatever some of the young men may get up to from time to time, only he of them all is likely to remain unmarried and nonconforming to the expected gender roles of the day.

Two outcasts bonded by their exclusion. It's a familiar tale and we see it again and again, in literature and in film. It resonates with us because, I suspect, we all from time to time feel ourselves to be outcasts. Rarely does anyone say, 'You know, the character I really like is the starched conformist who expects everyone to behave properly.' 'I rather identify with the dull one, who just gets on with life.' We like the outcast and the underdog though, I wonder, how often we really live out this role in our daily lives. Nonconformity can be appealing for a time, but most of us haven't the guts or the flair for it long-term. It's possible we lack the instinct for self-flagellation too; some nonconformity is simply inverted hatred of society. I make myself hateable so they will hate me because I hate them.

But what does any of this have to do with the epistle to the Hebrews? In today's second lesson we are encouraged to remember those who demonstrated faith in God's promises. In a part of the passage unfortunately cut by the compilers of the lectionary, we encounter Abel, Enoch, and Noah each of whom pleased God in various ways by expressions of their faith. Abraham too pleased God by leaving his home country in search of a better one, a land of promise. Sara is a curious inclusion because she is famous for not believing God and laughing at the angel who said she would conceive in her old age. Perhaps her faith blossomed with greater evidence than most when she did actually conceive and bear a child.

What links these people together is their willingness to trust, to build their lives- and sometimes upend them- on a word for something better. A rumour, a whisper, a faint promise of another country, a better country. What makes Colin Firth and Rupert Everett's characters so compelling is their total devotion to a possible future for which they have little, if any, evidence. There is no reason for a young Communist to believe that the oligarchical capitalist order which he experiences every day should ever change. There is no reason for a young gay man whose sexuality is despised, antagonised, and suppressed to believe that he could one day fall in love and publicly express his commitment to another man of his choosing. Yet they journey on.

Some of us here may find ourselves reflected in the communist's desire for a fairer distribution of resources; some of us in the young homosexual's desire to love without restriction. Some of us may at various times have fought for these things- even succeeded, even if success has been temporary or partial. We seek another country. But, at the risk of limiting the writer of Hebrews to a realised eschatology (the earth made heaven or heaven on earth), I want to draw us deeper into the narrative of Hebrews by suggesting that earthly successes will always be temporary and partial. The 20th century is littered with the ruins of attempts at realising the eschaton, the end of the ages, in real time. The League of Nations: a failure. The British Empire: a still-fading mist. The European Union: creaking from internal and external pressure alike. The white nationalist cultural hegemony of the United States: challenged by intersectional multiculturalism. Everything we build will fail.

Do not take this to be a discouraging statement. Let me repeat it another way: Everything we build will fail. *But now they desire a better country, that is, an heavenly: wherefore God is not ashamed to be called their God: for he hath prepared for them a city.* God hath prepared for them a city. He has built a future and it is not here on this earth. *These all died in faith... and confessed that they were strangers and pilgrims on the earth.* We should not expect our successes as enthusiastic redistributors of wealth to build the city of God. We should not expect our valiant efforts as campaigners for equality to bring heaven down or make a heaven of earth. For the earth itself is fleeting, our days are like the grass, and mankind passes away like a shadow leaving nothing behind.

*And truly, if they had been mindful of that country from whence they came out, they might have had opportunity to have returned.* It can be so easy to live as though this earth is our home and that there is nothing more, nothing greater, to look forward to. But to stake our hope on the here and now is to tie ourselves to something that by its very nature is changeable and passing away. By all means act. By all means improve. By all means strive. But keep your hearts fixed on another country, a better country, that is, an heavenly. There is where fairness and justice and equality will be found: when men and women from every tribe and tongue and people and nation will bow the knee before the throne of God and of his dearly-beloved Son Jesus Christ and cry Holy Holy Holy is God, the Lord, the Almighty. *There God is not ashamed to be called their God: for he hath prepared for them a city.* Amen.