

Sermon – Trinity Sunday 11th June 2017 – Farmington and Northleach

I very rarely preach directly on the great issues of our day, preferring instead to weave my way through the complexity of perspectives that infuse world events, and leaving you – articulate and reflective people that you are – to draw your own conclusions.

But today is an exception – for we live in challenging times and we have just experienced the strangest election campaign I can ever recall, dominated as it has been by shocking acts of terror and the increasing militarisation of our streets in response.

The evil events of Manchester and London that have dominated our news alongside the rhetoric of election campaigning have generated almost despairing tones from our politicians struggling to make sense of events, leave alone construct meaningful routes to peace.

Beyond the evil acts of individuals and those who motivate them, lie a fundamental challenge to our society, its culture and its values. Countering evil of this nature requires fundamental changes in the way we live out the values we seek to preserve. Every instance of hypocrisy in our personal, corporate and national life creates opportunities for hatred to be nurtured by those who seek to manipulate and exploit the vulnerable.

So here are three principles that I believe our national life needs at the heart of every community from the home to the largest corporate, from the smallest village to the centre of government.

The first is humility, and as Christians this means humility before God, as echoed in these verses from the Old Testament reading for today from the book of Isaiah...

Who has measured the waters in the hollow of his hand
and marked off the heavens with a span,
enclosed the dust of the earth in a measure,
and weighed the mountains in scales
and the hills in a balance?

Who has directed the spirit of the Lord,
or as his counsellor has instructed him?
Whom did he consult for his enlightenment,

and who taught him the path of justice?
Who taught him knowledge,
and showed him the way of understanding?
Even the nations are like a drop from a bucket,
and are accounted as dust on the scales;
All the nations are as nothing before him;
they are accounted by him as less than nothing and emptiness.
Have you not known? Have you not heard?
The Lord is the everlasting God,
the Creator of the ends of the earth.
He does not faint or grow weary;
his understanding is unsearchable.
He gives power to the faint,
and strengthens the powerless.
Even youths will faint and be weary,
and the young will fall exhausted;
but those who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength,
they shall mount up with wings like eagles,
they shall run and not be weary,
they shall walk and not faint.

The secular world approaches the complex situations that challenge our lives with the assumption that resolution is to be found through our own strength alone, whether that be diplomatic, military or both. A Christian approach recognises instead that there is a third dimension, that there is merit in calling upon the strength and wisdom of God, and this calls for humility.

Humility, of course, is not a virtue owned by Christians alone. But it is a virtue that flows through our scriptures. The practice of humility opens our hearts to the insights of others and enables that deep listening to one another that characterises true communication and facilitates mutual growth. Posturing might win headlines and give one a sense of power and place in the world; but it doesn't proffer respect for self or others. As the Brexit negotiations begin, wisdom suggests that the swifter the government can reach that place of true listening to our European partners, the swifter we can all move towards an amicable parting.

The second principle our country needs is a commitment to mutuality as the foundation for peace. Rowan Williams, the former Archbishop of Canterbury recently said this:

“The heart of Christian values has something to do with mutuality – a real commitment to and investment in the wellbeing of your neighbour, and the confidence that they are invested in your wellbeing.”

In the Christian tradition, our neighbour is not simply the person next door but any member of the human race. Humanity is indivisible for we are all children of God through whom the trace of the divine can be found, easier in some than others clearly.

Peace with our neighbour is not achieved through elimination or subjugation, for peace is not achieved through the oppression of difference, disagreement or dissent, but through mutual understanding and celebration. Living together with difference is challenging, and it requires an ongoing commitment to relationship as the torturous and painful history of Ireland continues to demonstrate.

The church in Corinth knew all about disagreement and division and Paul’s letters plead with the churches there to work harder at peace. Try to live in peace, Paul urges, and God’s love and peace will be with you. Don’t try to achieve the impossible immediately. Start with how you greet one another – with a kiss.

The third principle our country needs is confidence. Not a confidence that breeds arrogant nationalism, nor a confidence that reflects the strength and depth of our wallets, but the confidence of the gospel as described in the closing words of Matthew’s gospel that we heard a few minutes ago. A confidence that quietly gets on with demonstrating the values we hold dear, sharing them with neighbour and stranger alike and remembering always that God is with us.

We see this confidence come alive when terrorist tragedy strikes. One of the beautiful outcomes of the dreadful events in Manchester and London has been the sense of outrage that has manifested itself in courage, sacrifice and countless acts of love.

When tested our human capacity to unite across cultures, faiths, backgrounds is breathtaking. It's as if it is only in a crises that we drop our barriers of upbringing and become fully human. Suddenly in a crisis our confidence in our common humanity flourishes. Somehow we need to capture that confidence so that it becomes the way we relate to one another, family, friend and stranger, on ordinary days as well as truly awful ones.

The days and months ahead for our country feel uncertain and the election hasn't really resolved anything. As our leaders work out where we go from here, may our prayer be that they retain a sense of perspective as to what they can achieve, may they remain committed to peace through the understanding of difference and may they always act in ways that encourages the flourishing of the human spirit.

Amen.