

Trinity X Evensong 2019

It doesn't need me to tell you (again!) that we seem to live in increasingly strange times; from the political situation within our own nation, to the increasingly authoritarian regimes which seem to fly in the face of our ideas of modern liberty or democracy. In so many places we view the murkiness and deeply disturbing nature of the promotion of the cultus of self; China's Xi Jinping's rise to supreme power with all that goes with it; the madness of North Korea and its despotic and wicked leader; Russia, with the self-promoting Putin, who increasingly seems to seek to create instability within Europe whilst running a nation with an economy which will need urgent life-support 'ere long! 'Trump-world!' The list goes on, and you will undoubtedly have people you might wish to add!

In some ways, t'was ever thus, What I think has changed society the world over is the rise of modern technology. No one knows where the next incursion into personal space will come next. Certainly those who rely on the internet for their 'take' on the world will be at the mercy of those firms providing that linkage to the world-wide web. I have found it easier to cease looking at most news feeds lest my blood pressure needed medication to bring it down from the stratosphere! I wonder what Isaiah would have made of it? Certainly his vivid words seem very up to date and strike a chord about the some of the precarious nature of modern life:

*Putting your trust in oppression and deceit,
and relying on them; mean that this iniquity shall become for you
like a break in a high wall, bulging out, and about to collapse,
whose crash comes suddenly, in an instant;
¹⁴ its breaking is like that of a potter's vessel
that is smashed so ruthlessly
that among its fragments not a sherd is found
for taking fire from the hearth,
or dipping water out of the cistern.*

Vivid words! Somehow, Isaiah's words about bulging and unsafe walls, or smashed potters' vessels seem topical and applicable to modern day life. How are we to counter the wild goose chase currently running through society, where **self** is place above all else; where **my** opinions or actions are the only ones which matters? Are we careering ultimately towards the collapse of western democracy rather like that of the Roman empire, to be replaced by some kind of totalitarianism?

Well, truth to tell, I believe that there are still more sensible people than otherwise – we hear the shrill voices of extremism on all fronts because, in the words of Plato, “An empty vessel makes the loudest sound, so they that have the least wit are the greatest babblers.” It is when it becomes the norm that the proclamation of a better way is dampened or unpursued at all that proportion can be lost. One only has to look at the preposterous and increasingly shrill claims of both the right- and left-wing press over the issues of the day (please note that I did not say the **B** word!)

This is where the Church has a gift for the whole world in making known the essence of faith for the good of all, no matter who. Isaiah's running theme is restoration of the broken into an understanding of incorporation into the very essence of creation - God's Love – the link between all people and indeed of all things seen and unseen.

The Bible has a very direct way of approaching this, the tenor of which is found in two commandments we find within the Torah – the books of Moses. The first might be describe as creedal to the Jewish faith – the Shema from Deuteronomy – recited at all Jewish liturgies: ⁴ *“Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one!* ⁵ *You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your strength. Deuteronomy 6: 4*

At the most desperate moments of Jewish history, from the terrible medieval persecutions, Russian pogroms, to the gas chambers of Nazi Europe, the Shema was on the lips of those perishing because of their faith.

Add to the *Shema*, this - another commandment from Leviticus which gives us an extraordinarily take on living in wholeness: *“You shall not hate your brother in your heart, but you shall reason frankly with your neighbour, lest you incur sin because of him. You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge, but you shall love your neighbour as yourself: I am the Lord. 19: 17-18.*

Together, these two commandments become through Jesus, THE Great Commandment – this is the version from Matthew's Gospel:

One of the scribes came, and having heard them reasoning together, and perceiving that he had answered them well, asked him, Which is the first commandment of all? And Jesus answered him, The first of all the commandments is, Hear, O Israel; The Lord our God is one Lord: And you shalt love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength: this is the first commandment. And the second is like, namely this, You shalt love your neighbour as yourself. There is none other commandment greater than these.

On the tail of that, a question: Does religion still have a moral voice, a relevant voice in this brave new world? We have seen the rise of the terrors of religious extremism in recent times, particularly within Islam. Christianity itself has a shameful and wicked history of persecution and domination of people because of gender or difference through its own form of Pharisaic doctrine. Paradoxically, the rise of the shouting voices of secularism are nothing more than much of the same – promoting the straight-jacket of disconnection from any moral compass or regard for anyone other than 'self,' with a nod in some airy-fairy way to a better society. In bounding life in dogma, as Johnathan Sachs wrote in his book, *'Not in God's name – confronting religious violence,'* No soul was ever saved by hate. No truth was ever proved by violence and no religion won the admiration of the world by its capacity to inflict suffering on its enemies.'

Let us have the courage of our convictions to say that the message of the transformative love of God at the heart of the Great Commandment does surpass all else. It is the greatest gift the Church has to offer because it is ultimately revealed in its fulness through the self-giving love of Jesus on the cross. It is essential that it is vigorously proclaimed. Now, as you

might have heard me say before, don't think of the Church as a monolith (or even fractured mini monoliths!). WE are the Church – you and I – broken - yet called to share and proclaim this love both in season and out of season. In fact, acknowledging our brokenness is a gift to our proclamation.

Jesus died to bring about the fullest understanding we will ever have of God's love for each of us – the gift of Resurrection Life, which offers love to 'the other' before oneself, and through which we ourselves are then transformed – of 'other before self' is our connectedness to all humanity. This extraordinary egalitarian vision of humanity is Christianity's gift to the world. No other system comes close to such freedom offered to all no matter who they are. Without Christianity, there would be no humanism or secularism in western society. Both come directly from the development of Christianity. Perhaps it is time to acknowledge this rather than say that the Church must strike against the secularism of the West, which has certainly been a running theme in recent times, most notably from Pope Benedict XIV. Locking ourselves in ivory towers of righteousness won't help the world at all. We must be people who take risks for the Kingdom. It might be more useful to point out the foundational nature of the roots of secularism and humanism within Christianity and reveal that the fulness of our human journey is to be found in leading lives where we see the divine image in each other and behave as if we truly love our neighbours as ourselves.

Although in the second reading Paul is appealing to the generosity of the Corinthians towards their fellow Christians in the Jerusalem branch of the church who are in dire need of help in time of famine, in fact his message becomes universal in its understanding of the availability of God's love revealed in Jesus Christ:

Through the testing of this ministry you glorify God by your obedience to the confession of the gospel of Christ and by the generosity of your sharing with them and with all others, while they long for you and pray for you because of the surpassing grace of God that he has given you. Thanks be to God for his indescribable gift!

In revealing Jesus Christ within our own lives, we share this indescribable gift, and in doing so, can ponder the words of Isaiah: *'Your Teacher will not hide himself anymore, but your eyes shall see your Teacher. And when you turn to the right or when you turn to the left, your ears shall hear a word behind you, saying, 'This is the way; walk in it.'*



The Prophet Isaiah - Giovanni Battista Tiepolo (1696-1770) Palazzo Patriarcale, Udine

Isaiah 30:8-21

⁸ Go now, write it before them on a tablet,
and inscribe it in a book,
so that it may be for the time to come
as a witness for ever.

⁹ For they are a rebellious people,
faithless children,
children who will not hear
the instruction of the Lord;

¹⁰ who say to the seers, 'Do not see';
and to the prophets, 'Do not prophesy to us what is right;
speak to us smooth things,
prophesy illusions,

¹¹ leave the way, turn aside from the path,
let us hear no more about the Holy One of Israel.'

¹² Therefore thus says the Holy One of Israel:
Because you reject this word,
and put your trust in oppression and deceit,
and rely on them;

¹³ therefore this iniquity shall become for you
like a break in a high wall, bulging out, and about to collapse,
whose crash comes suddenly, in an instant;

¹⁴ its breaking is like that of a potter's vessel
that is smashed so ruthlessly
that among its fragments not a sherd is found

for taking fire from the hearth,
or dipping water out of the cistern.
¹⁵ For thus said the Lord God, the Holy One of Israel:
In returning and rest you shall be saved;
in quietness and in trust shall be your strength.
But you refused ¹⁶ and said,
'No! We will flee upon horses'—
therefore you shall flee!
and, 'We will ride upon swift steeds'—
therefore your pursuers shall be swift!
¹⁷ A thousand shall flee at the threat of one,
at the threat of five you shall flee,
until you are left
like a flagstaff on the top of a mountain,
like a signal on a hill.
¹⁸ Therefore the Lord waits to be gracious to you;
therefore he will rise up to show mercy to you.
For the Lord is a God of justice;
blessed are all those who wait for him.
¹⁹ Truly, O people in Zion, inhabitants of Jerusalem, you shall weep no more. He will surely be gracious to you at the sound of your cry; when he hears it, he will answer you. ²⁰ Though the Lord may give you the bread of adversity and the water of affliction, yet your Teacher will not hide himself anymore, but your eyes shall see your Teacher. ²¹ And when you turn to the right or when you turn to the left, your ears shall hear a word behind you, saying, 'This is the way; walk in it.'

2 Corinthians 9

9 Now it is not necessary for me to write to you about the ministry to the saints, ² for I know your eagerness, which is the subject of my boasting about you to the people of Macedonia, saying that Achaia has been ready since last year; and your zeal has stirred up most of them. ³ But I am sending the brothers in order that our boasting about you may not prove to have been empty in this case, so that you may be ready, as I said you would be; ⁴ otherwise, if some Macedonians come with me and find that you are not ready, we would be humiliated—to say nothing of you—in this undertaking. ⁵ So I thought it necessary to urge the brothers to go on ahead to you, and arrange in advance for this bountiful gift that you have promised, so that it may be ready as a voluntary gift and not as an extortion.
⁶ The point is this: the one who sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and the one who sows bountifully will also reap bountifully. ⁷ Each of you must give as you have made up your mind, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver. ⁸ And God is able to provide you with every blessing in abundance, so that by always having enough of everything, you may share abundantly in every good work.
⁹ As it is written,
'He scatters abroad, he gives to the poor;
his righteousness ^[b] endures for ever.'
¹⁰ He who supplies seed to the sower and bread for food will supply and multiply your seed for sowing and increase the harvest of your righteousness. ¹¹ You will be enriched in every way for your great generosity, which will produce thanksgiving to God through us; ¹² for the rendering of this ministry not only supplies the needs of the saints but also overflows with many thanksgivings to God. ¹³ Through the testing of this ministry you glorify God by your obedience to the confession of the gospel of Christ and by the generosity of your sharing with them and with all others, ¹⁴ while they long for you and pray for you because of the surpassing grace of God that he has given you. ¹⁵ Thanks be to God for his indescribable gift!

