

A Proper 21 (16th after after Trinity) Evensong Holy Trinity Cuckfield 27.ix.20. Ezekiel 37.15-28 1 John 2.22-29.

Sermon 437 - Unity

Abstract: If we think politics is too dangerous for Christians; it soon will be.

* Ezekiel 37.15-28

* 1 John 22.29.

Ezekiel, let's face it, is simply making the best of it, when he promises the unity of the Chosen People; by this time the former Northern Kingdom of Israel has disintegrated beyond repair and the Kingdom of Judah is in exile in Babylon en masse. But, to make matters worse, Ezekiel is recalling one of at least two dynastic horrors which took place in the early genealogy from Abraham: in the first place, we all know of the deception by which Jacob was preferred by Abraham over his brother Esau, preserved forever in a sketch by Alan Bennett about the "smooth man" and the "hairy man"; but there is a lesser known dynastic violation in Genesis 48, to which Ezekiel refers, when Jacob, the winner of that earlier deception, replicates it in respect of Joseph's sons by favouring Ephraim the younger over Manasseh the older. So when Ezekiel called for unity, it was a tough call which, perhaps perversely, is another reminder that the Old Testament is by no means a reliable guide to ethics.

I was reading this passage when my attention was drawn to yet another call from a politician for the country to "unite and come together" which has nudged me to using the Ezekiel Reading as a welcome pretext to think about what that might mean.

To begin with, I seriously suspect that when people call for unity what they are really calling for is conformity, or even subservience: the issue has been settled, so forget your objections and knuckle down. But this needs to operate at two levels: we must obey majority decisions enacted in law but that does not prevent us from disagreeing as a minority with the majority; nor does it prevent us from campaigning to reverse whatever the new law is.

If we are to avoid uniformity, which we must at all costs, what democracy needs is a set of processes for handling disagreement, and even dissent. This may sound extremely pessimistic but recent research has shown that the more clever we are, the better we are at finding evidence to support our point of view and the less likely we are to change our minds; so what matters are the processes that allow us to disagree rather than processes to nudge us into agreement.

Now this may not sound like the appropriate material for a Christian sermon but we need to make a strategic alliance with what was, for more than 200 years, our worst enemy, namely the rational Enlightenment. One set of processes which allow us to disagree is the multifarious output of the BBC which is now under threat and now competes with Rupert Murdoch's Times Radio, soon to be joined by the Fox-like News GB. The pretext is that the BBC is biased; nobody seems to be calling for firmer regulation but, rather, for abolition. We are already witnessing the belittling of the Judiciary and Judicial Review following the designation of Judges as the "Enemies of The People" and, as judges are a bulwark against the Executive, that is dangerous enough but the Executive is also becoming more powerful, sidelining Parliament.

Not only has there been a threat to legislate to break international law but also the recent Rule of Six regulations and attendant fines, were issued by the Executive while Parliament was sitting. There is now such a blizzard of initiatives that live for a day as distractions and an accumulation of verifiable falsehoods that we scarcely have the bandwidth to keep up with the deliberate strategy of bamboozlement; recently, a self-identified right-wing commentator, Peter Osborne, said he was logging Government lies last year but there were so many that by Christmas he was exhausted and gave up.

So when Ezekiel, on his shaky ground, calls for unity we should be careful; and we have not made a good start because I have to say that when I was a Member of General Synod the nastiness between factions were worse than anything I witnessed in party politics; we are not the entity to call for rational compromise when we have been incapable of practising what we propose to preach. Conversely, fudge is not compromise, it's simply asking for trouble; a compromise is a solution, like a length of rope, which gains strength from its multiple origins; but all these factors require a great deal of effort and organisation. The effort most required is the self-control and self-awareness to separate party loyalty from rational deliberation; the second is to understand our position for, as Margaret Atwood said in a recent interview: "Before you tell truth to power, be sure it's the truth".

If we go on the way we are now, we will soon sink into being a one-party state where the terms of trade are rigged such that oppositions can never succeed; a unity of sorts. So we really need to be careful what we wish for. As Christians we want freedom of speech to survive because, sadly, we are a minority; we want the poor to thrive because that is what Jesus wants; we want respect and justice for all because that is how our ethics have developed from Jesus; and we want honesty to be retained or trust will erode; and without trust society will die and we will retreat into self-seeking defensiveness and, paradoxically, aggression against those who are not like us. There will be two conditions of life: one for the powerful rule-breakers and one for the under-privileged rule-keepers. And who knows which camp we will be in. That's a pragmatic consideration but the important thing is to take some time, right now, to understand where we are and what it means; for there is very little time. We do not know how much but very little. And, as the catastrophe descends upon us, as a church we are silent because we think politics is too dangerous an area for us to address but if we do not it soon will be.

