



GRAY'S
INN

Sunday July 12th 2020

Isaiah 40: 1-5 & Hebrews 12: 1-2

INTRODUCTION

Today should have been Picnic Sunday and Festive Mattins, taking as our theme the 800th anniversary of Thomas Becket. On July 7th 1220, fifty years after his martyrdom, Becket's bones were taken from their underground safe in Canterbury Cathedral and placed in a new shrine. For centuries after, this day became a festival throughout England and parts of France. Pilgrimage to Canterbury became a high point of Christian devotion. We know that here in this Chapel the image of Thomas Becket dominated the East Window, which was then near the present Chancel step. We also know that three hundred years later, on May 16th 1539, on the orders of Thomas Cromwell, a member of this Inn, he was removed from the window, and didn't appear again until the Victorian rebuild, which is where he is now. But due to the COVID pandemic, only a few of us are here in Chapel, for a rather slimmed-down Mattins, but many more are joining us though ZOOM

To be a pilgrim

Pilgrimage is about going places. For pre-Reformation Christians it was to make the journey to Rome, to Santiago de Compostela, or to Canterbury. Such places were marked by what had happened there in the past: the death of St Peter, the arrival of St James, and the death of Thomas Becket in 1170. Fifty years after Becket's death Canterbury ranked as the third most holy place in English if not European Christendom. Such places were resonant with the devotion and worship of the centuries. Like Muslims on the Hadj to Mecca, Christian pilgrims went to recall what had gone on before and to enmesh themselves in the tradition and spirituality which it had generated.

But to be a pilgrim wasn't just about remembering past glory. For the pilgrim himself or herself, it was also about themselves, who they were now and what they wanted to become. Sometimes they travelled alone. Sometimes they joined with others, for companionship, for safety, like Chaucer's pilgrims on the road to Canterbury. But for each of them it was always part of a personal journey. They were bringing their own needs, fears and prayers. So to arrive at the shrine was not the end. Indeed it could be a new beginning.

It's a bit of a cliché to say that life is a journey. But it is. We go from birth to death. We have hopes and dreams, sometimes fulfilled, sometimes cruelly dashed. There can be comfort in received certainties, but also new vitality when we are open to new possibility. The saddest people in Jesus' parables are those, like the Rich Young Ruler, who aim for a certain kind of superficial success, only to find, at the end of their lives, that they've been travelling in the wrong direction.

John Bunyan famously described the Christian life as a pilgrimage, fraught with danger and temptation, moving forward and slipping back, but slowly making progress. I find that a much more realistic picture of the journey of faith than any prescriptive account of what you must believe or what you should rightly feel. We grow in faith, we experience comfort and doubt, we know both light and darkness, we pray that we may stay faithful and open to what new things God may have in store for us. And we journey in hope, that at the end we may be like Pilgrim who crosses over the great river and “the trumpets sounded for him on the other side”.

As we’ve passed through this pandemic, and as – please God – we start to come out the other end, the main focus has been on its dark side. Not surprising when so many lives have been lost, services stretched, businesses collapsed, and people’s livelihood and mental health threatened. But I dare to suggest that, on this particular journey, we have had the opportunity to learn some new things and to face some questions which need answering.

As individuals, some people have been rushed off their feet caring for others, or driven to distraction by family pressures. Others have experienced frustration, despondency, fear, and isolation. They’ve felt left in limbo without continuous busyness, and with the usual expectations and supports knocked away. One aspect of pilgrimage is to leave behind our normal world, go somewhere different, and experience ourselves somewhere new. Pilgrimage, unlike just a relaxing holiday, helps us to see ourselves and our world in a different light.

In that way, maybe, the experience of these past four months has raised questions, difficult but important questions, about who we are, what we have made of our life, what values we have lived by, what difference we will have made. It was Socrates who observed that “an unexamined life is not worth living”.

It’s said that one mark of Lockdown has been more people wanting to pray. Now feeling weak and helpless is not the best reason for turning to God, but it’s certainly an understandable one. When pressures rise, or we feel alone, we may be more ready to admit certain things about ourselves, things which we usually try to hide or avoid, and look for help. A recent survey showed that half the adults in the UK pray, and during Lockdown a quarter have watched a virtual church service.

Some will dismiss such a turning to God as reverting to childish dependence. But others will see it as a sign of what St Augustine said, which I quoted it in my Easter message at the beginning of the pandemic, and which GRAYA News kindly reprinted. It took Augustine a long time to sort out his disordered and troubled life, but in the end he discovered where home really is. “You have made us in your own image, and our hearts are restless until they find their rest in you”.

And what we’ve been forced to go through may, as any pilgrimage should do, help us to see not just ourselves in a different light, but the society we live in as well. There are immediate things

which need putting right, like the deplorable state of Social Care, which successive governments have acknowledged and then run away from. This week in the House of Lords the Bishop of Carlisle called for a cross-party Commission to resolve this once and for all.

But there are also deeper questions about the kind of world we are creating. In the Magnificat Mary talked of turning the world upside down.

So what are our national priorities? What if we started paying nurses and hospital cleaners the same salary as the useless people in the City of London and Canary Wharf who spend their days just making money out of money? What if we stopped to ask why BAME people are amongst the worst paid and the most vulnerable to disease? What if we turned our prisons into places where people are reformed rather than made worse, to the detriment of us all? What if we expected rich people to pay as much of their income in tax as poor people? What if we took this opportunity, as happened in 1945, to start turning the world upside down, or rather the right way up?

So we journey on, surrounded (as our lesson from Hebrews said) by those who have run the race in times past, moving forward as we follow Jesus, the pioneer of our faith. The final word this morning goes to Sydney Carter, the 1960's folk singer who wrote "Lord of the Dance" and other songs which you may never hear in this Chapel but you may remember from School Assembly. One of them was very much a song for pilgrims: "One more step along the world I go". The chorus goes like this: "And it's from the old things to the new, keep me travelling along with you".