

2023 14th May, Easter 6: All Saints, Hove.

Acts 17.22-31; Ps 66.7-18; 1 Peter 3.13-end; John 14.15-21

Easter 6 and the Church moves outwards in the light and power of the resurrection.

We read of St Paul in Athens where he engages with a classic city: cosmopolitan, its people like new ideas, the city is full of idols, religion is everywhere but it doesn't ring true.

In this setting St Paul preached, Luke in Acts says argued, in the synagogue and market place. And he made what has become one of the great missionary speeches of the New Testament in front of the Areopagas, a hill in the centre of the city near the Acropolis. Starting with the inscription on an altar to an unknown God he put flesh on it by telling them about the one God who made the world and everything in it and who is known in Jesus Christ and has sent his Spirit upon us.

It's a great passage for us to read today following the coronation, the Archbishop of Canterbury's contribution to the debate in the House of Lords about legislation intended to stop the small boats coming across the English Channel and the publication of another very uncomfortable 'lessons learned review' about mistakes made by senior bishops who, of course, are acting on behalf of the whole Church.

A elderly friend who was commissioned as a Methodist lay preacher when he was young in the early 1960's was given a Bible in which there was a letter from the then President of the Methodist Conference, in which he wrote:

Study this age.

Sense its need.

Preach to its condition.

It is possible to give an account of the teaching of the Bible, though because it is a library of 66 books (39 in the Old Testament, 27 in the New Testament), a collection of law, history, prophecy, wisdom, myths, stories, poetry, songs, gospels and letters, written over about a thousand years, the Bible is rarely singular in what it says about anything. It points to a way of life which aims for the best but knows sometimes we do the worst.

It's not straightforward to move from scripture to its meaning today. In Biblical studies, it's usually put as, 'if that is what was said then, what does it mean for us now'. We have to understand our context as well as the scriptures. It takes study and discernment to see what God is saying to us now.

I love the way rabbis discuss and debate. Rabbi A says this, Rabbi B says that and Rabbi C says something else. It is said by Jews that where there are three rabbis there are four opinions. A friend who is a rabbi added, "only four?"

But that is often the nature of truth. It is rarely singular and gets hammered out in a community.

The coronation was beautifully done but not having had one for 70 years it came as a bit of a surprise to most people. It was a profoundly Christian event, inclusive in the way the establishment created space for others to be acknowledged as present, but firmly in the hands of the Archbishop of Canterbury. The King does not have free reign. He rules under God. In a country with an unwritten constitution that is a major part of how he is held accountable. The question for us as a country is whether and how this develops or is discarded. A government formed from an elected Parliament under the Sovereign, the Sovereign under God. It is not a small matter. It was the substance of the English Civil War. The matter was settled but there are still roundheads as well as cavaliers. The debate is about the nature of this country.

In the House of Lords, Archbishop Justin used his Christian authority, all the more striking so soon after the coronation, to say that the proposed legislation on small boats and immigration is "morally unacceptable" and "politically impractical". He said, it risked damaging Britain's reputation at home and abroad, failed to take a long term and strategic view of migration, challenges and undermined "international cooperation rather than taking an opportunity for the UK to show leadership". He was clearly speaking about what it means for us to be a Christian country.

Lord Dannatt, a former Chief of Defence Staff and an active lay Christian, agreed with him.

Members of the government argued there is nothing moral in allowing the business of small boats to continue and the status quo has got to be challenged.

It has been a real spat in our public life. You won't be surprised for me to say I'm with the Archbishop on this one and think the government has got it wrong. But it's a great example of public debate about the meaning of Christianity and other

religions, a bit like St Paul in the public squares of Athens trying to win people over to the way of Jesus Christ.

That's what St Paul was doing and that's what Justin Welby was doing in the light of the resurrection.

Whatever we think, our responses to migration is one of the things we should be praying about, and it's clear that as in Athens there are a variety of views in the public square. We each have to weigh the arguments in the light of our faith.

In the Gospels we see Jesus with the outcasts, the marginal, the powerless. Here in Hove we have the experience of asylum seekers and refugees among us. We have opened church up to them as a safe space. They give us an insight into what is happening. We have an opportunity to listen to their experience and give them a voice in the debate. They are the victims of this terrible system. We are agreed on this.

When we have a labour shortage it is ridiculous not to use the skills of refugees and asylum seekers who want to make a contribution but are unable to do so because we are so slow to resolve their status. We can do this better.

One last point. The Archbishop also got a speeding fine this week which got a lot of publicity. He was driving at 25 mph in a 20 mph area. It's not uncommon but he didn't get it sorted and built up a big fine and penalty whereas I just did the speed awareness course. It's not as serious as the safeguarding failures that also came up this week but what it tells us is that one alone is perfect and religious leaders are human and get things wrong. The question is what can we put up with as human failings from individuals and institutions and where the limits of tolerance lie.

Who are we and what sort of Church and society do we want to be?

Jesus taught us to love God in the way he loved and died, sacrificially. In him we know God's judgement and God's mercy. "In him we live and move and have our being". It is better to suffer for doing good than doing wrong. As an elderly lady in Salisbury used to say, "On, on."