

OLD TESTAMENT READING Isaiah 25:1-9  
NEW TESTAMENT READING Philippians 4:1-9  
GOSPEL READING Matthew 22:1-14

SERMON from Bishop Mark Santer

There's no news in my saying that we are living in days of distress and uncertainty. And there's no comfort in saying that there have been plagues and pandemics before, such as the Black Death in the fourteenth century, which killed a third of the population of Europe, and the so-called Spanish flu of a century ago, which killed between 20 and 50 million people. This time, as well as the coronavirus, we've got climate change, the depletion of the earth's resources, the growing gap between rich and poor, and the worldwide refugee problem. And they are all inter-related.

In times like these it's tempting to look back to an imagined past when we suppose that all was well. But we rewrite the past. A friend of mine, the same age as me, told me how at the time of the referendum he went out trying to drum up support for staying in the EU. A man in his fifties couldn't agree with him. He was going to vote for Brexit. "We were all right on our own in the war," he said. My friend said to him, "You weren't alive then. I was, and it was dreadful." And we didn't win the war alone. Far from it.

Memories are always selective - and the more so as we reframe them so as to justify a grievance or to blot out the awareness of wrongs that we have done to other people. All that stuff about "Land of hope and glory" and "Rule Britannia" - it blanks out the dark sides of our country's story, like the grand houses built on the profits of slavery, or the spoliation of India. Just visit Powis Castle near Welshpool and see the loot brought home from India in the eighteenth century by the conqueror Robert Clive. It made my stomach turn when I saw it all. He has a statue in the middle of Shrewsbury. The good - and there was good - was always mixed up with the bad. The Roman Empire was built on violence and slavery. But it provided the conditions for the travels of St Paul and the spread of Christianity. We could say something similar about the links between European empires and the spread of Christianity in modern times. Even so, I can't forget the Bishop from Ghana who once told me about the scars left by the white missionaries who had abused black African boys. But the pedlars of our "island story" - they only want the good, and they'll even paint the bad good.

Why all this hankering for a past when things were supposedly simpler and better, even if we have to rewrite the past to make it look simpler and better? Why hark back to the past, real or imagined? It's because we feel a need for security. Even in good times all of us need stories about who we are and where we come from. These stories establish our identity. They tell us who we are. That is why the study of history is so important. But we have to do our best to get our history right. No Battle of Britain without remembering the bombing of Hamburg and Dresden.

You know how it is. When we meet someone new, we want to know where they come from. It helps us to place them in our world. Sometimes we can get this very wrong. I remember a day from the time when I was Bishop of Birmingham. The Queen came to Birmingham to hear about the work of the Church Urban Fund. So we laid on an exhibition in our church in Castle Vale. One of the stalls was about the Fund's work in East Birmingham, and one of the people who was there to answer questions was a lad from East Birmingham - unsurprisingly, a boy of South Asian heritage. My colleague John Austin, the Bishop of Aston, overheard the following dialogue. One of the royal party (I won't say who) asks the boy: "Where do you come from?" "Birmingham, Sir," says the boy. "I'm sorry, I didn't quite hear that," says the royal personage, "where do you come from?" "Birmingham, Sir," he says again. "Oh, but where do you really come from?"

We ask where someone comes from, so that we can place them. And if we come with the wrong assumptions, we get them wrong. The terrible thing is when we start using our identities against one another. I tell good stories about my village, my town, my country, and bad stories about the people next door, as if my identity is threatened by yours because yours is different. My wife's granddaughter was picked on in a secondary school not so very far from here because her grandmother was German. Now where did that come from?

Who am I? And who are you, or who is this stranger? We take it for granted that the answers to these questions lie in the past. Where do we come from? What is our back story? Our stories give us our identity: I come from Bristol, I was brought up in a vicarage, I was sent to an independent boarding school, I did National service, I studied in Cambridge, and so on. These are stories about my past, and they give other people facts and fantasies to build on when they are trying to work out who I am.

In the same way nations have stories about themselves and one another, all of them rooted in facts and fantasies about their pasts. It is the same with the churches and their identities. Anglicans, Roman Catholics, Methodists, Lutherans – all of these identities are rooted in past history, and we are accustomed to telling stories against one another.

But if I want to know who I am where it really matters, as a Christian, I must look not to the past but to the future. For me as a Christian the question is not "Where do I come from?" but "Where am I going?" I remember the words of the old catechism that I had to learn when I was prepared for confirmation: What is your name?

N or M.

Who gave you this name?

My godfathers and godmothers in my baptism, wherein I was made a member of Christ, the child of God, and an inheritor of the kingdom of heaven.

My baptism gave me a new birth and a new identity, an identity focussed not on the past but on the future. I was made an inheritor of the kingdom of

heaven. This was St Paul's great insight:

As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.

We are, as Paul also says, citizens of heaven. That is our new and deepest identity. Of course, for as long as we are in this world, we have our earthly identities, as members of this or that family. We are, in Paul's case, a citizen of Rome, and in our own case citizens of the United Kingdom or wherever else we may belong. But all of these identities belong to this unstable world that is passing away. Our lasting citizenship is in heaven. That is where we shall belong in the end. That is where we already belong.

This is why for Christians there will always be a tension between their loyalty to their Lord and their loyalty to their earthly rulers. It is a tension rooted in the story of the cross. Earthly authorities could not endure the challenge of an alternative king, even if his kingdom was not of this world. So Christians can never say without qualification, "My country, right or wrong." As a Christian, I will give to Caesar what is rightly Caesar's, but to God I will give what is God's, which is myself. As Paul says, "Our citizenship is in heaven, and it is from there that we are expecting a Saviour, the Lord Jesus Christ." He is the one to whom we must give our account.

Why talk about all of this today? It is because I was struck by the words of today's collect. In it we ask for the gift of faith so that, forsaking what lies behind, we may reach out to that which is before. It is a good prayer for times like ours when we are tempted to nostalgia. It directs to turn our attention away from the past and towards God's future.

This prayer echoes one of the most important passages in the writings of St Paul, the third chapter of his letter to the Philippians. In that chapter he lists the things he can boast about in the world he has left behind him, all the things that had made him what he was – "circumcised on the eighth day, a member of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of Hebrews; as to the law a Pharisee..." But now that Paul belongs to Jesus Christ, he has come to regard all of these advantages as so much rubbish for the sake of knowing Christ Jesus as his Lord. And so: "This one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on towards the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus."

Of course we look back. We look back to the prophets and to the apostles, and to the story of the life and death of Jesus, and to the examples of those who have gone before us.

But we look back only in order to look forward, as we do when we recite the creed, with its final words of expectation. We look forward every time we say the prayer that the Lord himself gave to us: "Thy kingdom come." We look forward every time we celebrate the Eucharist. As Paul says, as often as we eat this bread and drink this cup, we are proclaiming the Lord's death until he comes.

"Thy kingdom come," we pray, "on earth as in heaven." We are not simply

praying for the final fulfilment of God's purpose. We are also praying for the signs of God's kingdom today and tomorrow.

So what is it that we are actually looking for as we pray this prayer? We are looking to God to do his will. With Jesus on the cross, we are putting ourselves in God's hands. That is an act of faith, and so today's prayer asks for the gift of faith, not of knowledge. We cannot not know what God has in store for us, except for knowing by faith that we and all creation are in the hands of God. This unknowing is what makes us so anxious. But we have the Lord's promise, that he has gone before us and he will be with us. None of this means that we opt out of the concerns of today and tomorrow. It is our hope for God's future that gives purpose and meaning to what we have to do today. The Lord who tells us to pray for the coming of God's kingdom goes on to tell us to ask for the bread that we need for today. The bread for today, not the bread for tomorrow. We cannot do everything, only what can be done today. We cannot build utopia; that way lies totalitarianism. We ask for the resources for today, and we do what we can, knowing that we can never do all that has to be done, and we leave it to God to make what he will out of our work. Don't hanker after the past; do what has to be done today, in the sure hope of God's tomorrow.

One of the great Christian figures of the twentieth century was the Swiss theologian Karl Barth. I leave you with some words that he wrote to a friend as he entered old age:

The shadows of our day are growing longer...But because they are cast by the light which shines before us, we cannot and must not look back on them, but must look forward to the great light before us.