

A Sermon Preached by the Bishop of Coventry at a Service to mark the 350th Anniversary of the Book of Common Prayer at Holy Trinity Stratford on 23rd September 2012

Readings: Zechariah 11 and 1 Corinthians 8

Introduction

1662 is a year etched on to the mind of Anglican Christians throughout the world. It is the year of the reinstatement of our beloved Book of Common Prayer – the liturgy that John Wesley called the finest in Christendom - after the 20 years of its suppression during the Commonwealth period, a time of civil war in Britain when King, Bishops, Liturgy and Christmas were banned.

We will all have our fond and formative memories of the Book of Common Prayer. One of mine is of Evensong as a teenager when I had the doctrine of the Trinity imprinted on my soul through the oft-repeated doxology: 'Glory be to the Father, and to Son and to the Holy Spirit'. Later, a key moment in my own call to ordination happened within a Prayer Book Evensong in a small village Church on Easter Sunday. It changed the course of my life.

But for Christians of a different tradition 1662 has some very different, and darker associations. It was the year of the Great Ejection when 2000 Church of England ministers refused to swear their oath of conformity to the Prayer Book and so fell foul of the Act of Uniformity. Among them was the popular vicar of this parish, Alexander Beane, who became homeless along with his wife and several children. Alexander Beane was a faithful pastor who was followed by some of his parishioners, eventually forming the Congregational Church which later became the United Reformed Church in Rother Street.

I attended a powerful service in Westminster Abbey of Reconciliation and Healing of Memories between the Church of England and the United Reformed Church in February of this year: a reaching out in reconciliation to heal the memories of the past that has taken local form here in Stratford with the Minister of Rother Street URC, Graham Spicer, preaching here at Evensong last week and with Martin Gorick, present day vicar of Holy Trinity preaching in the United Reformed Church – the first vicar of Holy Trinity to preach among Alexander Beane's followers on their turf for 350 years.

Zechariah: a scene of darkness

The lectionary has delivered us two rather difficult and somewhat obscure readings. Our Old Testament reading from Zechariah is not exactly celebratory. It pictures a dark, disturbing and desperate world.

Zechariah is a prophet of early 6th Century before Christ. The Jewish people have returned to Jerusalem from Exile in Babylon but they have not returned to the Lord with their hearts: society is on the brink of moral collapse – neither are the 'healthy being nourished nor the maimed being healed', Zechariah tells us.

In a dramatic action of unimaginable horror, Zechariah depicts the Lord, the God Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, giving up on his people – refusing to be their Shepherd any longer and – moreover – relenting on his promises.

Zechariah stands before the people of God in Jerusalem with two staves in his hand, depicting the Lord, the Shepherd of his people. One is the staff of God's favour (his goodness and steadfast love of his people). The is the staff of unity (the unity between the tribes of Israel and Judah which had been at the heart of God's purpose to choose a people who would be a blessing to all the peoples of the earth).

And he breaks them – Zechariah breaks the staff of God's favour and breaks the staff of the unity of God's people. And he gives his people over to the 'idol shepherd that leaveth the flock'.

Zechariah: chinks of light and hints of hope

It is a dark and terrifying imagining.

Yet the prophecy of Zechariah is not without hope. There are chinks of light and hints of hope. In Chapters 13 and 14 there is the promise of the return of the Lord God to the people who refused to return to him – the great day when the Lord God will say 'They are my people' and the people will say, 'The Lord is our God' and when the God of Israel will be 'king over all the earth' (14.9).

It is the visitation from on high of which the Prayer Book's version of the Benedictus speaks in this way:

'Through the tender mercy of our God: whereby the day-spring from on high hath visited us.

To give light to them that sit in darkness, and in the shadow of death: and to guide our feet into the way of peace'

This is the restoration of the favour of the Lord and the proof that the staff of God's grace can never be broken.

Moreover, Zechariah gives us a glimpse of the cost of God's grace and of the repentance that it causes in the people of God as 'they look upon me whom they have pierced . . . mourning . . . as one mourneth for his only son' (13.10).

It is fitting that the year before this commemoration of the 350th anniversary of the Prayer Book and the Great Ejection an image of Christ was uncovered for half a day in the Thomas Becket Chapel of Holy Trinity. It is a stained glass window of 'The mocking of Christ'. Jesus wears a crown of thorns, his eyes are full dread at the ordeal to come and tears run his face'.

This is the form that the God of Israel and Judah assumes to save his people. The form of the Good Shepherd who lays down his life for his sheep – for all his sheep.

The only breaking of the staff of God's favour will be the breaking of the body of Christ for thirty pieces of silver (v.13).

The only breaking of the staff of the unity of God's people is the breaking of the body of Christ as he breaks down everything that divides us – as St Paul says in the letter to the Ephesians:

'Christ has made both one, and hath broken down the middle wall of partition between us'.

'Christ reconciled both into one body by the cross, having slain the enmity thereof' – reconciled both Israel and Judah, Jew and Gentile, Anglican and United Reformed, lover of Prayer Book and devotee of contemporary worship, proponent and opponent of the ordination of women as bishops 'into one body by the cross, having slain the enmity thereof'.

Christian Unity

In our New Testament reading, St Paul gives some help about what this means in practice when we find ourselves disagreeing with each other as Christians – as, of course, we do from time to time: 'But when ye sin so against the brethren, and wound their weak conscience, ye sin against Christ' (1 Corinthians 8.12).

Here St Paul gives us a principle of Christian unity – unity between Christians of different Churches and unity between Christians in the Church of England. When we sin against each other – when we hurt, by word, deed or thought, another member of the body of Christ – we hurt Jesus Christ himself, we sin against the Lord. St Paul says this even of those he disagrees with over points of theological doctrine and Christian practice. He is the first person to encourage us to be clear and firm in our beliefs and faithful and true in our practice – but he is also adamant that where Christians are believing and practising their faith with sincerity and devotion – even when they are wrong – they are worthy of respect. We are not to hurt and to harm each other. For in sinning against each other, we sin against Christ.

Conclusion

I said at the beginning that these two readings were rather difficult and obscure. I was tempted to turn from the lectionary and to choose my own. But I decided that was not in the spirit of the Prayer Book.

I am glad that I stuck with them because these readings are fundamentally a call to God's people to live in unity with each other and to build a righteous, just and godly society.

That is the heart of the vision of the Prayer Book.

The first thanksgiving after communion has us praying:

'And here we offer and present unto thee, O Lord, ourselves, our souls and bodies, to be a reasonable, holy and lively sacrifice unto thee'.

And in the General Thanksgiving we pray:

'And, we beseech thee, give us that due sense of all thy mercies, that our hearts may be unfeignedly thankful; and that we show forth thy praise, not only with our lips, but in our lives, by giving up our selves to thy service, and by walking before thee in holiness and righteousness all our days.'

Well over 100 years before Alexander Beane was ejected from his living here at Holy Trinity Stratford, Archbishop Thomas Cranmer wrote his masterly Preface to the Prayer Book of 1549 in which he set out the vision of English Reformation that all people of this nation should be 'stirred up to true goodliness . . . and be the more inflamed with the love of [God's] true Religion.

That is the true act of uniformity that Alexander Beane and all Christian people can unite around: all the people of this nation living under the gentle and just rule of the one God. That is the fulfillment of the prophecy of Zechariah: 'They shall call upon my name, and I will hear them: I will say, 'It is my people: and they shall say, 'The Lord is my God' (Zechariah 13.9).

May this nation once again be conformed to the vision that inspired the Reformation and lies at the heart of the Book of Common Prayer – the bold vision of a godly society of a people 'following the commandments of God, and walking from henceforth in his holy ways'.