SERMON FROM COVENTRY CATHEDRAL

PREACHER       John Witcombe, Dean
DATE           6 December 2015
EVENT          Cathedral Eucharist
BIBLE READINGS  Philippians 1.3-11; Luke 3.1-6
THEME          Advent 2: the challenge of Syria

We have got ourselves in a bit of a pickle. What are we to do about Syria – well, the decision has been made, we are going to join with others in air attacks. It’s been an enthralling week, again, in politics – but of course this is not some arbitrary simulation game, but one in which real missiles are fired, real people will be killed, real consequences will unfold. And the difficulty – or part of the difficulty – is that none of know what those consequences should be.

What is a Christian to make of this? And what is a Cathedral to make of it – especially one that carries the theological branding of Peace and Reconciliation? Just over a week ago, as we waited for our speaker to arrive in St. Michael’s House, we found ourselves wondering about having monthly meetings to work through what we might say publicly as a ‘statement from Coventry’ on the issues of the day. But the issues are complex – and those of you who were able to get to our intern Matt’s excellent talk on ISIS in St. Michael’s house last Tuesday will testify to that with a deeper level of understanding than many. So what should we do – should we wring our hands in impotent anguish? I’ve been impressed by the level of engagement of our Bishops in the debate – but if you look up on the web the speeches of Bishop Christopher, and Archbishop Justin, you will see the challenge afresh. Bishop Christopher spoke powerfully in the Lords debate to say that he was not personally persuaded of the value of air strikes – but went on to say that he saw them as inevitable, given the state of the wider debate. Archbishop Justin reiterated his argument made over a year ago in relation to Iraq, that air strikes alone will never win the war, but that we need to win the war of values – the holistic, theological war.

Today is the second Sunday in the season of Advent: the season in the church’s year when we are encourage to clean up our act, prepare our lives and our world for the coming of Christ. As we all know, it gets heavily and unhelpfully overlaid with the preparations for Christmas, but at heart it is a wake up call to see the world, and our lives, as they really are – and to open them up at their heart to God’s redemption. That sounds as if it might have some resonance with our present situation. So what happens when we hold today’s scripture readings up as a mirror to our newspapers? What do we see reflected back from the Word of God into the word on the streets, or the many words in the corridors of power?

Let’s start with the gospel reading. The start of Luke 3 is one of those resonant passages that we associate with the season ... as the bongs of Big Ben fade away, the date is clearly established for this particular piece of news. The ruling powers have moved on thirty years from the somewhat similar dating passage at the start of Luke chapter 2, but the political context of turbulent unrest remains. It is has become almost a cliché that Jesus was born, and ministered in a time of occupation and political and religious unrest. But it’s worth restating again. God is not absent when the nations are at war with one another. He is not looking the other way. He is deeply and intimately present.

This is the first point to notice this morning. God is not absent. God is not absent, and neither is God’s word. But what is God doing, and what is God saying?

John the Baptist has always been a favourite of mine – some of you will have heard me say before that I was named after him by my Father, although whether he had given this much thought before being asked ‘which John’ at the font, by the vicar at my Baptism I really couldn’t say. But I embrace it, and him, gladly.
We look out through his image in the window of the West Screen, next to the Virgin, past the ruins and towards the Council House. And others look through him at us ... 

This is what he says, into history: God is coming! Get ready! Fix the place up ... fix yourselves up. And of course, God came — though not everybody recognized him. God came, in human form, with a new sort of religious message, a message of love, of forgiveness, of humility — of peace. The message of Jesus was not at odds with the historical message of the Hebrew faith — but that message had become lost in the posturing and pride and fear of those people who had been entrusted with it. And so he came embodying that message in himself, and ready to bear the cost in his own life, in his own body, of a new covenant between God and God’s people.

How is that historical reality mirrored in our world and in our experience today? Let’s turn to the first reading from Paul’s letter to the Philippians. This letter contains one of the most sublime passages of all of Paul’s letters, often called the ‘Philippians hymn’. It’s the poem that gives the title to the Cathedral’s Christmas Eve service: ‘Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, and being born in human likeness.’ The reason Paul wrote those words to the Philippians, or perhaps quoted them, is that they couldn’t get on. It is a letter written to a church at war with itself.

So Paul writes to ask them to work out their relationships with one another in the light of the gospel. Now this is the real world, and some relationships flourish and others do not — but that should never be at the expense of love. And the working through of difference in a way that does not dehumanize the other is the word and the work of the gospel in the world today.

Paul refers twice to ‘the day of Christ’ in this passage. It is his reference point to steer by — that we should aim to be ready to greet Christ when he comes. Not to be embarrassed by unfinished business, in a world in which all are God’s children. And because we don’t know when Christ will come, we need to do our best to be ready for him today.

Relationships are complex things — as you’d expect, given that they are at the heart of our complex lives. But the endgame for our relationship with Syria, with President Assad, with the shadowy leaders of ISIS, or Daesh (a deliberately derogatory term) is to be in right relationship. A relationship that is marked by the attitude of Christ: of humility, of hospitality, of respect. For that to be true, we need to know them, and to know ourselves — we don’t seem to be that great at either of these. And part of that knowledge will start at home. Our task as a Cathedral community then is this: to seek to know ourselves and what divides us; to seek to know those who would be described by us or by themselves as our enemies; and to be ready for the coming of Christ. We know we can’t put this unholy mess right — our part is to put ourselves right, not to stand in judgment, and to look and pray for the coming of Christ. And to model a way of living with each other and relating to the world which will show the reality of a different set of values which will win the world. Oh yes — and if we haven’t remembered it, to pray for our enemies ... it’s pretty hard to bomb people you are praying for, though that doesn’t mean that it can’t or even that it shouldn’t be done. And we don’t fly the planes — so let’s make sure we pray, too, for those that do.

This is a complex world, but we look for the presence among us of the one who is called Emmanuel. We make His presence known in all we do or say or show in our lives together. It’s quite a responsibility — but we are strengthened by his word and by his sacrament, and we place our trust, our lives, and the life of the world, in his hands. We have a friend who we spent time with in New Zealand earlier this year, and who has since visited us again in Coventry. She shared with us some simple words which have been sustaining us, and which I share with you as I finish this morning: Even though..., even here..., Emmanuel.

Amen.