

SERMON FOR EASTER 5 | 19.05.2019

Acts 11: 1-18, Revelation 21: 1-6; St John 13: 31-35

Do you recognise the first line of this novel: *It was a bright cold day in April, and the clocks were striking thirteen?* Of all the films that really struck me as a child was the BBC adaptation of George Orwell's book '1984' starring Peter Cushing. Filmed in 1954 and then still in black and white, it was one of the most chilling films I have ever seen and it lurked strongly in my imagination when we read it as a set text in secondary school. 1984 describes the attempt by Winston Smith to break away from the all-embracing hate-induced society dominated by Big Brother, where Room 101 is not a game show but the place where prisoners were tortured by exposing them to the very thing they hated most – in Winston's case with a mask filled with rats.

And whether you read the book or watch the film, Orwell's ability to make you feel the all-pervasive tyranny of the regime is quite extraordinary. Like Winston you feel your own sense of love and joy and hope being squeezed out of you. Is that why some of the Orwellian vocabulary still resonates with us now: phrases like $2+2=5$, doublethink and the thought police are commonly thrown around when we feel powerless? Is that why CCTV, designed to protect and help us, doesn't feel that far away from the 1984 'telescreen' that was to be found in each room of a prole's house so that Big Brother could watch every move.

It was interesting to discover that the original Hollywood big screen version of 1984, filmed in 1956, was actually financed by the CIA as a warning against the rise of another Joseph Stalin.

Today our fears for the future may well lie in what President Trump might do at the end of a second term of office. So the latest piece of dystopian TV drama has Emma Thompson starring in *Years and Years*, a fledgling politician railing against the government with an American nuclear strike against China looming in the background. Set just five years into the future, most of what we see is recognisable but the screw is turned just a little harder: England is full of Ukrainian refugees and a young adolescent declares herself to be Trans – not transsexual but trans-human. Bethany wears a mask to distance herself from her parents. And she wants to be released from the pain of human emotion and failure and to be a bundle of data instead.

So what does the future hold? What do you hope for, long for, work for? Is there a sense that everything is less good than it once was? Has the Brexit debate and the apparent break-down of two-party politics given us an unsettled feeling - that those in charge really haven't got a clue about what is going on? Are we tempted to feel disconnected with the wider community in case we get hurt by the ills of our day – from knife crime on the streets to cyber-attacks on our computers which steal our privacy and rip us off?

In a generation where communication is easier than ever and access to the social media makes us able to be in touch with an ever growing circle of people, I wonder if we are not more fearful than ever – the equivalent of the hypochondriac who searches the medical dictionary in search of things that are wrong with them. For the sons and daughters of 1984 and Years and Years, the sea level of worry seems to be rising fast.

It is into that rather dark pool that the words of our second reading are addressed: *Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away. And I saw the new city coming down from heaven and I heard a voice saying...*

Saying what? That the Church has got all the answers to the world's ills? That there is some instant solution to the malaise which is in danger of fragmenting our relationships and making us unwilling to work together?

and I heard a voice saying... See the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them and they will be his people. God will dwell with them and he will wipe away every tear from their eyes. Mourning and crying and pain shall be no more for the first things have passed away.

Well, I guess that having God among us is great, as far as it goes. But where's the evidence? And the answer to that surely lies in the first reading. The first part comes from the life of St Peter (not always the brightest bulb in the box) who is firmly rooted in his Jewish culture and whose mind is pretty well made up about what he can eat and what he can't.

Then we read that while he is opening his mind to God in prayer, he has a vision. Down on a huge tablecloth comes a feast – of all the things the Law has told him he shouldn't eat. Look in the book of Leviticus for terms and conditions: it is all there.

And the voice in his head says, *get up Peter, kill and eat*. But he won't: these animals are all unclean and he won't do it – not once, not twice, not three times. And then the tablecloth disappears.

Is that the end of the matter? Of course not. As the second part of the reading says, *at that very moment...* At that moment he receives a message from three men who ask him to bring to faith six brothers and all their household, located in the neighbouring city of Caesarea. The trouble is that all of them are Gentiles – unclean, uncircumcised: not 'our people' at all.

Poor Peter: he hasn't been trained for this and it is well outside his comfort zone. But the Spirit of God is at work: *And then I remembered the word of the Lord, about how he would send his Holy Spirit on those who believed. So who am I to hinder God?!*

What does the future look like now? For Peter it meant leaving Joppa for Caesarea, working with people who weren't Jews – and throwing over a lifetime of sticking to a gastronomic diet that he believed was fixed for all time. Somehow God was going to work in different, unexpected ways, and there were going to be some amazing developments as a result. Because that is how God worked with Peter – and it is how he works with us...

You might be tempted to think that all the new art on the walls of the Church today is just a bit of middleclass froth. So, a few pictures on the walls: how nice. And a few concerts too: how pleasant.

But little by little these things are transforming what we are doing here at St James'. Just within these last three or four days we have made some significant new contacts including one man who has lived in Packington Street for 43 years and never been inside the Church before. He is on his way to being baptised.

It isn't the art or the music that has drawn people here although they are useful tools. What draws people is the open door, the open door which says 'you are loved by God. Whoever you are and whatever life has thrown at you. Come and work with him'.

All we have to offer is another way of looking at the world.

It is about accepting and loving and not controlling; it is about not being risk averse; it is about pursuing the goals that God is setting, a refusal to give in to the fears and PC expectations of the world. And it is about offering the time for listening and healing which today, are in such short supply.

Of course we will make mistakes; of course there will be times when we get caught out and get taken for a ride. But the way of Jesus is not about identifiable success but about offering – sacrificially – another way of being, another way of working, so that we can leave the dystopian dramas to our TV screens and bedtime reading.

A new commandment I give you: that you love one another.

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away.

It is so easy to fall into the cynical trap of thinking that what we think we see is all there is. St Peter's story is today's message that God will always be looking for new ways of bringing hope and love to those who are looking for it. All he needs is our willingness to make the Easter message come alive.

In fact, Mr Orwell, let's put anxiety about the future into Room 101. As we said last week: God has all of our lives safely in the palm of his hand.