

## **SERMON FOR EPIPHANY 3 | 26.01.2020**

Isaiah 9: 1-4; I Corinthians 1: 10-18; St John 2: 1-11

It has been wonderful to get away for a few days and Maria and I had the chance to ramble around Norfolk – the county of my birth – for the inside of a week in delightfully warm weather. After days in the Brecklands around Fakenham, seeing more medieval churches than enough but also the fabulously wide beach at Holkham, a couple of stately homes and the small fishing port of Blakeney, we spent the final day in Norwich.

You may or may know that it has two Cathedrals. We did the tour of the Anglican one with its amazing roof full of medieval bosses and the great copper font inherited from Rowntree Mackintosh the chocolate makers! And finally we made for the Catholic Cathedral for their Diocese of East Anglia and a very welcome cup of coffee.

And it was there that I picked up the small guide and read: *This great Church was built through the generosity of Henry Fitzalan-Howard, 15<sup>th</sup> Duke of Norfolk. Duke Henry oversaw the whole project which he donated as an act of thanksgiving for his happy marriage to Lady Flora Abney Hastings, making St John's Cathedral a love story in stone...*

Now, we might well say, *they could afford to do that; the Dukes of Norfolk are among the richest people in the country.* And of course that is true but the scale of the Cathedral is enormous and it would still have required Duke Henry and his accountants to do some fairly substantial calculations to see if it could be afforded.

And whatever his wealth, we mustn't miss his motivation: as a sign of his love he gave the money to build what was, for the first seventy years just a parish Church. It didn't become a Cathedral until 1976.

The Bible readings we have to reflect on today are designed to take us back to the basics of our faith and the question: what difference does our faith make to the way we look at things?

Isaiah was the most remarkable prophet of his age, some 800 years before Jesus, and he wrote at a time when Assyria to the north of Israel was flexing its muscles in a new drive to raid the fertile lands of the Egyptian Nile region, way down south. Poor Israel was in the way and the Assyrian army simply wiped out the Northern Kingdom of Israel - Zebulun and Naphtali in our 1<sup>st</sup> reading - leaving the southern kingdom very exposed. Its leaders talked tough but they were not going to prevent being wiped out too unless they changed tack.

In these circumstances Isaiah's message was clear: unless you learn to depend on God rather than on your own resources you have no future. *If you will not take your stand on me, you will not stand firm* Isaiah tells them in chapter 7. And that is exactly what they did: under the new King Hezekiah they put their trust entirely in God and Jerusalem did not fall to the Assyrians as all the commentators had predicted. It was God who saved his people not the politicians or their fledgling army. Today's passage is part of the communal thanksgiving: where there was gloom and despair, *now the people who walked in darkness have seen a great light – and the rod of their oppressor (the Assyrians) is lifted.*

All these things are familiar to us too. London is full of great memorials to those who have saved our nation, not least in various capacities during the Second World War. Similarly, just outside Jerusalem stands Yad Vashem which this week became the international focus for the terrible sufferings of the Jews and others, murdered in Auschwitz, and finally liberated 75 years ago. Standing in its huge halls you can't but be moved by the photographs of those who died, or miss the gratitude of the millions who visit Yad Vashem year by year.

But these places, these museums, are not just bland memorials; they are also places of prayer and thanksgiving: *when all was lost, when all was dark, when we had nigh given up all hope, God was on our side. We survived - and now we want to say thank-you.*

Despair can take many forms. But whether it is the snuffing out of the life-blood of a whole nation or something very much smaller and personal, we are all prone to that gut-wrenching hopelessness which can seem unendurable.

**When we lose someone precious – as we have done this week with the sad death of Caroline Yeats - or we see our hopes and plans crumbling in the dust because we haven't passed an exam or we have ran out of money or friends and supporters when we are trying to achieve something: all of these events force us to ask, *who is there for me; who cares about me; why am I having to cope with this on my own?***

**The wedding party at Cana was no big deal. It was just like any other wedding reception and the hope was that everyone was going to have a really good time. Perhaps they were having too good a time because at some point there is the awful realization that the wine wasn't going to last the night out! Maybe it wasn't exactly a life-changing event but it is was the crisis of the moment. **What were they going to do?****

**These stories in the Bible are not just entertainment. They are designed to make us ask: what is the solution to those feelings of despair and hopelessness that I encounter? The shape of the story is the same shape as in Isaiah: when push comes to shove you can either try to do things in your own strength or you can turn to the one person who you really can rely on.**

**And so they do: they ask Jesus to help and although he doesn't seem too keen to help at the beginning, we quickly see in St John's Gospel how this minor crisis can be used as an indicator of how trust in God is actually the solution in every challenging situation. As we sang in the song between the readings *Gather us in, the lost and forsaken, gather us in, the blind and the lame: call to us now and we shall awaken, we shall arise at the sound of your name...***

**It isn't that God sends us horrible things to cope with to make us learn to trust him; that would be ridiculous. But the experience of generations of people of faith has been to discover that when we 'let go and let God', extraordinary things do happen. The Assyrians didn't destroy Jerusalem. The wedding party was able to breathe (and drink) again. Like the feeding of the 5000 or the way Jesus helps the disciples to find fish after a fruitless night on the Lake, the way of God is to turn things round – from negative to positive.**

**And the essence of what these stories are trying to tell us lies in our own attitude when challenges face us.**

**Because there is a natural inclination, when life gets tough, to try to preserve what we have and to turn in on ourselves. It is a familiar form of crisis management. And God says: *OK I understand where you are coming from; but it is not my way of doing things.***

**Today, after the 10am Mass, we are holding a congregational meeting to consider where the Organ Project has got to. Just this week the Diocesan Advisory Committee (the DAC) has approved the plans we have submitted – both the technical details and the aesthetics – of what the finished organ will look like.**

**But that is the easy bit: they aren't having to pay for it! They are not the ones writing the cheques!**

**Those of us charged with trying to get this Project right are not immune from the daunting scale of what seems to be emerging. As anyone will tell you, it's not the upfront costs which terrify you, it's the hidden ones – the things that no one sees but which still need attention: pad stones, the re-routing of the electrics or whatever. How do we keep a lid on the final bill?**

**And then we go back to where we started this morning: on thanksgiving, on generosity - and on trusting in God to see us through. Instead of the Duke of Norfolk we give thanks for William Lambe whose money not only paid for the building of this Church in 1875 but for nearly a hundred years also maintained the fabric - including replacing the roof! Instead of the Duke of Norfolk we give thanks for Richard Cloudesley whose charity has paid for so much over the last ten years at St James' including the secondary glazing, 50 new chairs, the refurbished kitchenette and the screen and data projector – at least £50,000 worth of grants. Now they are giving us a further £50,000 towards the Organ! And finally, through the development of the Vicarage over the last ten years, we are able to draw on some of the rental income too for all those hidden bits and bobs that also need to be paid for.**

**Like Norwich Catholic Cathedral, we are hoping that all the projects that we have undertaken recently are also a 'love story in stone', signs of our trust in God who, when we have needed him, has so generously found us the money. Water into wine: it's the story of what God has, and will, do for his people here at St James.**