

SERMON FOR TRINITY 5 | 09.07.23

Isaiah 40: 1-5, 27-3; Philippians 4: 4-9; St Matthew 13: 1-9, 18-23

If I ever get to write a short memoire - as Alice my mother-in-law is encouraging me to do - then it will have to be called: 'From what I can remember'! When the memory banks were being given out I am afraid I got the short straw but, like most of us, there are some events which stand out as clearly as if they happened yesterday and some people who remain in sharp focus.

But recalling what has happened over these last 40 years since I was ordained in Durham Cathedral on 3 July 1983 is of little use unless we can begin to track some kind of meaning, some major threads, from all that time. What has God been up to and what can we learn from all those experiences.

Starting with the year 1983 is of course somewhat arbitrary but it was the year of Margaret Thatcher's greatest electoral victory, the year when the pound coin was first issued, the year the very first breakfast show was launched on BBC1 and the year when the Piccadilly line reached Heathrow airport.

In the Church 1983 seemed like a time of relative stability. We were still expecting almost everyone to use the same modern prayer book (the green ASB) and then, one priest in one parish was still the norm in most urban areas. But underneath the surface there were a number of changes on the horizon though to start with they didn't affect parishes very much.

In 1982 there was the most enormous hoo-hah when Archbishop Robert Runcie had prayed for the Argentinian dead as well as our own service personnel at the big Falklands Thanksgiving Service at St Paul's. Then there was the increasing criticism of the CofE for the challenges contained in the 'Faith in the City' Report which, in 1985, had asked why so little investment was being given to the big sink council estates around the country. In both cases people asked: *What is the Church doing, meddling in politics...?*

Within the Church since 1983 there have been two debates which continue to divide us: the issue of the ordination of women - to the diaconate in 1987, to the priesthood in 1993 and as bishops in 2020. More recently the sexuality debates have centred around same sex blessings and the place of the LGBTIQ+ community within the Church, with the refusal of some, especially in Africa, to recognise the unity of the Anglican communion and the leadership of Justin Welby.

Both have had the ability to lead our critics to wonder if these issues wouldn't lead to the end of the CofE? Was it any wonder that Cardinal Koch challenged the Archbishop of York, Stephen Cottrell, when he was on a visit in Rome recently. *What is the point of you seeking unity with us, said the Cardinal, when you are tearing yourselves apart on your own?*

And he has a point: here in the London Diocese when, in this year's ordinations of 54 new priests (and that's just for London, north of the river!) the Evangelicals went to All Soul's Langham Place to be ordained by the Bishop of Ebbsfleet; the Anglo Catholics who don't accept woman priests went to St Andrew's Holborn to be ordained by the Bishop of Fulham and the rest went to St Paul's Cathedral with Bishop Sarah and other area bishops. As Archbishop Stephen said at the opening of General Synod last week, meeting in York, *We have got used to disunity. We think it's normal when, in fact, it is a disgrace, an affront to Christ and all he came to give us...*

And why is it a particular disgrace? Because unlike us, the rest of society isn't obsessed with gay rights or the place of women as leaders – in fact it generally believes these issues have long since been sorted. So while the Church is spending all this time and effort on concerns which the rest of the world doesn't care about, we are wasting the precious resources and skills that we have been given and are failing to address the main job: of talking about God and his love - in ways which make people want to sit up and listen.

So if I wanted a quick summary of these 40 years I am afraid that might well be it: we have taken our eyes off the ball. Just look at the statistics: less than 2% of adults in this country regularly go to Church. Largely the English '*don't do religion*'. And yet...

And yet in a world that is changing minute by minute, where hostility and war is rife, is it ever going to be possible to return to the sense of there being one solution to anything? Life is just too complex to be able to agree on one answer – either in economics or in matters of faith and practice. From railways to social care, immigration to how we affirm loving partnerships of all sorts, there will always be answers within answers and a great deal of moral untidiness. *I may not like what other people are doing and some things aren't right for me; but I can see that the 'common good' means that they need me to give them space to do what feels appropriate for them. But it doesn't mean I have to do it too...*

So many of us have come to believe that the role of the Church, - the churches - is increasingly to accept that from now on we are far less likely to be 'preaching the truth' than 'being the love of God in whatever place we find ourselves'. As Professor Anthony Dyson has written: *the trouble in the past was that the Church put 'knowledge' before 'people'. "Who or whatever you are, this is what you must know and what you must do". What we are now beginning to learn, often from the Third World, is that when we allow people to discover things for themselves – drawing on all their experiences - the Holy Spirit finds a way of transforming lives.*

And that means, as Archbishop Stephen said to Cardinal Koch, that our way of being Church is to be a kind of 'federation', a flexible family of faithful men and women who, as best as we can, are willing to walk together with our conscientiously held differences – showing the world that we have the humility and the openness to be able to disagree – still loving one another.

As we know that is a tough calling. It is so much easier to spend time with those we respect, 'people like us', people with the same sense of humour and the same outlook on life. But that isn't a Church that is a social club or a clique! Jesus' disciples were the most random mix of tax collectors and political revolutionaries - people very much at the bottom of the pile.

But because this experimental road is so tough and we find ourselves drawn to despair because what we do doesn't seem to bring instant success, it is then that Isaiah 40 comes to the rescue. *I know you feel that nobody cares about you. But those who put their trust in the Lord will be lifted up on eagle's wings; they will run and not grow weary, they will walk and not be faint.*

And today's Gospel, the parable of the Sower, backs that up. For me it has always been a great help as I have wrestled with what to do. Just work out the maths: having spread the word as far as we can, Jesus reminds us that, at best, only a quarter of those who hear us will respond. That is what being a 'living sacrifice' means. We offer our community the chance to meet with God – but it up to him, not us – whether they take up that offer or not. Sadly, in 40 years, this is a lesson that I never learned...

But that's the theory at least! But in all honesty I guess I have some sympathy for Dorothy Day, the great founder of the Catholic Worker movement in America in the 1930s. In one of her final journals she wrote: *I feel like an utter failure. The older I get the more I feel that all I have been able to give is faithfulness and perseverance. Yet Christ understands us when we fail because, after all, he was the greatest failure of them all.*

And it's true: Jesus did what he believed he was called to do – and died crying out *My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?* Yet the Kingdom of God was perfectly revealed in what he did. None of us knows the value of our work for God. We do our best: and faithfulness and perseverance may just have to be enough.