

Readings: 1 Kings 8.22-30; Hebrews 12.18-24; Matthew 21.12-16

It's good to be here at All Saints again. Our two churches have a long history of connections. Two of my predecessors, Fr. Mackay and Fr. Tomkins served here too. Mackay often refers in the Parish Paper to how things were done at All Saints, Clifton – usually as a prelude to changing the way things were done at Margaret Street.

This Sunday, I'm here as the warm-up act for Fr. Kim. We will be praying for you and for him at All Saints on Wednesday.

'You have not come to something that can be touched, a blazing fire and darkness, and gloom and a tempest, and the sound of a trumpet, and a voice whose words made the hearers beg that not another word be spoken to them.....so terrifying was the sight that Moses said, "I tremble with fear."'

The Letter to the Hebrews contrasts the experience of the Israelites at Mount Sinai and the Christian vision of the heavenly Jerusalem, the city of which a church building is a visible symbol.

- One is a terrifying prospect. It has boundaries which must not be crossed on pain of death. The people beg not to hear another word. Even Moses, the friend of God, trembled with fear.
- The other has at its heart, **"Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel."** This a voice speaks of mercy not vengeance.

If we read through the Old Testament we find an internal debate on the relationship of Israel, the People of God, with the rest of humankind.

- On the one hand, there are those passages in books like Joshua, which with their talk of divinely mandated genocide and ethnic cleansing. make uncomfortable reading for us who live in the aftermath of the Holocaust and more recent horrors. Then we find books like Ezra and Nehemiah, from the period after the return from Exile in Babylon. They stress exclusiveness, a clearer drawing and policing of the boundaries against the contagions of paganism.
- On the other hand, there is the counter-voice in books like Jonah and Ruth. In Jonah, the citizens of pagan Nineveh repent at the Jewish prophet's preaching – rather to his surprise and annoyance. Like some Christian preachers, he would much rather they all went to hell. In Ruth, the non-Jewish daughter-in-law remains faithful to Naomi, and will become the forebear of David, and so, eventually of Jesus too. That most Jewish of the gospels, Matthew, will include her in the genealogy of Jesus. His gospel begins with Gentile Wise Men from the East coming to the infant Jesus. It ends with the Great Commission to make make disciples of all nations.

In an age which prizes inclusiveness and tolerance highly, the exclusivism of Ezra and Nehemiah sounds harsh to our ears. But even if we see the more inclusive approach as fulfilled in the New Testament and the mission of the Church, we should recognise that in the midst of great pagan empires and cultures, a tiny nation with its peculiar religion, could only survive and maintain its unique spiritual identity, especially when it had lost political independence, by stressing its distinctiveness. The lesson of Jewish history has been that this has enabled a people to survive both assimilation and extermination. But the lesson of the Church's history has been that it could only

grow into a worldwide body by crossing boundaries and breaking down barriers.

This is all very interesting you might be thinking, but what's it got to do with a parish in Bristol in 2014, almost on the eve of getting a new Vicar? Well, a Dedication Festival is not just an occasion for looking back, thankful for the blessings received here, but for looking forward and asking what God wants of us in the future.

This tension between exclusive and inclusive, the closed and the open, is not restricted to the Old Testament and the Jews. It has applied throughout Christian history and in our own age and in every Christian community.

In an increasingly secularised Europe, with religious practice in decline, how should the Church respond?

- One response was expressed and symbolised by Pope Benedict: the Church must become more self-conscious in its identity; more tightly disciplined, even at the price of being smaller. It has a pessimistic view of the world, especially the modern world; suspecting that nothing much good can come of it. There was a retreat from Vatican II with its spirit of openness to the world into an ecclesiastical yesterday. The outward and visible sign of this was a raiding of the baroque dressing up box and a pope dressed in ever more elaborate vestments.
- The alternate view is expressed and symbolised by Pope Francis. In his exhortation on evangelisation, **“The Joy of the Gospel,”** he speaks of the missionary transformation of the Church: a Church which reaches out to people where they are; rather than expecting them to come to it. **'An evangelizing community gets involved by word and deed in people's daily lives; it bridges distances, it is willing to abase itself as necessary, and it embraces human life, touching the suffering flesh of Christ in others. Evangelisers thus take on the “smell of the sheep” and the sheep are willing to hear their voice.'**

All this is given sacramental form in the simplification of liturgical attire, life in two rooms in a clerical boarding house rather than a palace, washing the feet of women as well as men, and even a Muslim on Maundy Thursday

I wrote an article a few months ago in which I referred to the anxiety in some circles – including anglo-catholic ones, - that the pope was “low church.” I said that I thought a “low church” pope is actually good for us “high church” Anglicans. He reminds us that being catholic is not primarily about dressing up in church, but about proclaiming the whole faith to the whole world.

The Church of England has been brought face to face with the reality that large swathes of the population no longer sense that they belong to it.

Many people simply lack the language and the sign language we take for granted. We might know what we are talking about or what we mean when we do this or that, but we cannot assume that they will. Many have learned neither hymns nor prayers at school. What we take for granted can sometimes seem as irrelevant to most people as Morris Dancing or one of those historic re-enactment societies which dress up as cavaliers and roundheads at the weekend.

The Church can seem not just incomprehensible but quite as alien and as frightening as Mount Sinai. If you're gay or divorced or unemployed, or in some places a woman, you may well get the impression that church is not for you. Even the bravest souls might tremble before entering. Some churches seem to specialise in condemning those of whom they don't approve – usually those who

will never have joined or will make themselves scarce pretty quickly. What they need to hear and encounter is the Jesus who speaks of mercy.

In the Temple, the chief priests complain to Jesus about his healing of the blind and the lame and the children singing the Messianic greeting, **“Hosanna to the Son of David.”** He responds, **‘Yes, have you never read, “Out of the mouths of infants and nursing babies you have prepared perfect praise...”’** Some of our churches look and act like the local branch of the Society of Herod the Great: longing for a re-run of the Massacre of the Holy Innocents as soon as a child appears. Having got here in time to see the end of your Family Mass, I know that's not the case here. At their best, churches in our tradition have been places where the poor and disadvantaged of this world, what the Victorians called the “undeserving poor” and the sociological chaplains of consumer capitalism call the “feral underclass,” have found a welcome; along with others who don't measure up to the criteria of respectability.

And as if that were not enough, life is even more complicated for parishes like ours.

In an age when one form of evangelicalism or another seem to be in the ascendant in the Church of England, and many seem to have little regard for the things we believe are important, even vital, to the life of the Church: liturgy and sacraments, prayer and contemplation, art and music, church buildings as houses of prayer, or even be actively hostile to what they see as obstacles to evangelism, it is a tempting option to retreat into the bunkers of our sanctuaries.

Some of you are old enough to have read as boys P.C. Wren's “Beau Geste” stories about the French Foreign Legion. In one, a detachment of legionnaires is sent to a remote Saharan outpost called Fort Zinderneuf. Besieged by Tuareg tribesmen, their commanding officer dead, the draconian sergeant major takes command. As their numbers are whittled away, he creates the impression that the fort is still fully manned by propping up the dead on the ramparts.

There are anglo-catholic churches like Fort Zinderneuf. One priestly wit described them as: “More statues and relics than people, and sometimes it's difficult to distinguish between the relics and the people.” The priority is to maintain the status quo: to prop up bodies on the ramparts in case the archdeacon comes round to see if the parish is still alive. A friend of mine took charge of one such famous parish fallen on hard times. He found that even PCC members hoped for nothing more than that the church would survive long enough to bury them. They had no interest in sharing their faith with a new generation.

How are we to see the way forward? Is there only a choice between maintaining our identity behind the walls, or abandoning it in order to attract a wider spectrum of people?

Now when you hear a question like that, you expect that the answer is going to be “No.” otherwise I would not have bothered posing it.

We need, I think to look at a model of parish life which neither hides behind walls nor thinks that everything contained within those walls needs to be abandoned. The model I visualise is one in which there is a dense core of activity – worship, sacrament, prayer, preaching, study and service– all those things which build our Christian character as community and individuals. They need to be taken not less seriously but more for the very reason if we have porous boundaries which people can cross, open doors which they might come through. We are living in a frontier situation, moving out into the unknown. Remember, before the Israelites had the Promised Land and the Temple in Jerusalem, they had tabernacle which accompanied them on their desert journey as they were formed into a people for God. They were led on that pilgrimage by the pillar of cloud by day and fire by night.

Our catholic worship and practices should teach us to see God present not only in sanctuary but in the world: to recognise Christ's sacramental presence not just on the altar and in the tabernacle but in the brothers and sisters to whom he has bound himself for ever, even if they know him not. As we seek to engage in the task of mission, of sharing the good news of Jesus Christ, we will find that we need these things not less but more.

Scripture and sacrament speak to us of Christ's involvement in the world. They are a resource, not just for us but for all Christians, even many from other traditions. Perhaps they have never encountered them, and are not so much hostile as unaware. But hostility and unawareness may well have sprung from our rather conspicuous failure either to be transformed by them or to share them with others.

I have spoken of the Jesus who speaks of mercy, whose sprinkled blood speaks more graciously than the blood of Abel, but we who are his disciples cannot forget that he also speaks a word of challenge, of call – calling to follow him and to share in his ongoing work. We are given great gifts in the life of the Church, in the life of your church and mine, but we are not given them merely for our own benefit and comfort, even our own spiritual improvement, although we all need that. We are given them to share with others.