

Twelfth Sunday after Trinity 2015

Joshua 24: 1 – 2a, 14 – 18; John 6: 56 – 69

I'm very grateful to the Bluebird Singers for singing not only this morning's service, but Choral Evensong at 6.30pm as well; and also performing a concert last night. My only disappointment is that last night's programme didn't include "Down by the Sally Gardens." There are arrangements by Britten and by Rutter (if not others.) Are they in your repertoire? I should have put in a request.

It's a poem by Yeats set to a traditional tune. The poem is:

Down by the sally gardens my love and I did meet.
She passed the sally gardens with little snow-white feet.
She bid me take love easy,
As the leaves grow on the tree.
But I being young and foolish,
With her did not agree.

In a field by the river my love and I did stand.
And on my leaning shoulder she placed a snow-white hand.
She bid me take life easy,
As the grass grows on the weirs.
But I was young and foolish,
And now am full of tears.

I didn't make a request to the Bluebird Singers because it's only just recently come to the front of my mind it plays a very significant part in the novel I was reading in the aeroplane on my way back from our summer holidays in order to be standing here this morning. The book is Children Act by Ian McEwan. It's about a woman who sits as a judge in the Family Division of the High Court. In part it's very technically precise insight into the life style of High Court judges and the intellectual processes by which their judgment are formed; and in part it's about a crisis in this particular judge's marriage.

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In her professional life in the Family Division of the High Court, she has to deliberate and hand down judgments about some of the most acute dilemmas the human confronts, such as whether to separate conjoined twins thereby sacrificing the weaker one to ensure the survival of the stronger one, or whether not to separate them thereby leading to the inevitable death of them both.

Of course both the Bible readings this morning are about dilemmas: Joshua's dilemma about whether to go on worshipping the old traditional gods or to worship the God of Israel exclusively; and the dilemma of the followers of Jesus whether simply to walk away from his frankly baffling teaching or to stick with Jesus.

The particular dilemma that is charted within the McEwan novel is the case of a highly intelligent and articulate 17 year old Jehovah's Witness who has leukaemia. He and his parents are refusing to receive

the blood transfusion without which he will inevitably die before his 18th birthday, which is only a few weeks away. Of course, once 18, it would be his inalienable right to decline treatment. The question for the judge was whether it was in his best interests to overturn the very well-reasoned and sincere decision which in only a few weeks he would have been entitled to make anyway.

It's not at all obvious which way the judge is going to decide. It's quite a cliff hanger. You can feel yourself being pulled first this way and then that way as counsel for the different parties make perfectly reasonable and cogent arguments on each side of the dilemma.

Ultimately the judge does decide in favour of authorising the blood transfusion against the young man's own wishes. What clinched her decision was something that happened when she adjourned the hearing to travel across London in a taxi with the

court-appointed social worker for the young man to go to sit at his bedside in order to make her own judgment about the level and independence of his understanding. What happens is that he takes out his violin and plays for her Down by the Sally Gardens. Only he didn't know it had words; he just thought it was a tune: ~~~~~~. The judge sings along with him and the words, of course, include the lines "She bid me take love easy . . . She bid me take life easy . . . But I being young and foolish, with her did not agree . . . And now am full of tears."

The climax of the judgment which the judge hands down is that the young man's welfare is more important than his decision, and requires that she grant him "the life and love that lay ahead of him." What saddens me is that she then adds "And protection against his religion." What saddens me even more is that when she is later reflecting on her subsequent meetings with this young man, she says he was "wanting what everyone wanted, and what only

free-thinking people, not the supernatural could give: meaning."

All too often religion can be quite understandably represented – and this is just as easily true of mainstream Christian traditions as it is of sects like the Jehovah's Witnesses – as being the opposite of free-thinking; as doling out precepts which are life- and love-denying rather than life- and love-affirming.

But that's not how Peter deals with the dilemma the followers of Jesus are facing in the Bible story this morning. He doesn't resolve the dilemma: he side-steps it. He refuses to acknowledge what others are experiencing as a dilemma which they resolve by walking away. He does not stay with Jesus because he's come to the conclusion that he does understand him, can get his head round him and has decided he agrees with him. Peter recognises that what Jesus offers is in a different category to precepts or arguments or propositions that can be agreed with or

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disagreed with. He recognises that what Jesus offers is “the words of eternal life; and we have believed and come to know that you are the Holy One of God.”

Remember, what we have read this morning comes at the conclusion, the climax of a long discourse in John’s Gospel on the Bread of Life. It’s been read out in church, Sunday by Sunday, for three or four weeks now. If you’ve been in church on each of those Sundays, you’ll have heard three or four sermons now on this Bread of Life. Those words of Peter are the concluding summary of what this Bread of Life is: the guarantors of participation in the life of God.

Someone has said that in the sacraments God shows us what he does, and does what he shows us. It is in receiving the bread and wine of Holy Communion that we receive the life and love that lie ahead of us; and that life and love is given meaning. Like the lover Down in the Sally Gardens, God bids us take love easy,

bids us take life easy. Take, eat; choose life, choose love; do not be full of tears.

Amen.