

Second Sunday of Epiphany 2018 Evensong

Isaiah 60: 9 – end; Hebrews 6: 17 – 7: 10

I wonder: if we had a poll of people's favourite books of the Bible, just where the Book of Hebrews would come in that poll. I happen to have some inside information that there is at least one member of the congregation – someone with fine theological credentials I might add – who would put it fairly near the bottom of their list! And it's not difficult to see why! It's pretty dense stuff; we don't know who wrote it; but I always feel, whoever it was, was some sort of barrack-room lawyer. And I don't feel particularly inclined at quarter past seven on a Sunday evening to be wading through its earnest arguments, fighting my way through, verse by verse. So I hope you'll indulge a rather more broad brush approach.

But even if we are taking a broad brush approach, there is an important question we need to be asking ourselves. It's the Second Sunday of Epiphany. And

an epiphany is a revelation of a divine truth. The Epiphany season is the season when we reflect on what God coming among us as Jesus reveals to us about the nature of God.

So, even if we don't want to get too bogged down in Hebrews 6 & 7 - working out what the two unchangeable things guaranteed by oath are; and who Melchizedek is; and between him and Abraham and a succession of Levites who was taking a tithe from whom – even if we're not doing that, but are taking a big, broad brush and are looking at it in the round, on the whole, we need still to ask: what is the overall message of the passage that tells us something about God through Jesus?

And I want to suggest that the message is: God has finished everything: all of God's purposes have been completed by Jesus; the battles are all won; the victory has been achieved.

And then we have our first reading, Isaiah 60, which shows us what that completed picture looks like . . . or at least how that ideal was envisaged in the eyes of whoever wrote the final part of the Book of Isaiah; how it was envisaged by a spokesperson for a small and vulnerable recently liberated community. It's a bit problematic for us because it's fairly imperialistic. I have to say that my utopia doesn't include other nations bowing down in subjugation to my nation; it doesn't include others serving my nation; and it doesn't include my nation being able to cream off wealth from other nations. But I'll settle for no more violence, no more destruction and no more devastation. It's just that I'd like to see it in a context of equality and mutual dignity.

But the point is that our wildest dreams, our greatest desires, however we envisage them from the point of view of whatever age we live in, have all come true. Jesus has ended the painful reality of the human

condition and a new reality has been established through him.

All of which is a load of religious clap-trap. We don't live in a utopia; the world is becoming increasingly dystopian. We live in the era of Trump, for heavens' sake! [By the way, has anybody else ordered it off Amazon, Fire and Fury, Peter Wolff's account of the first year from within the White House? It's due to be delivered tomorrow. So if you don't see me for a few days, I'm just holed up in the Rectory with my new book.] We are talking about yuge dystopia; the world is bigly dystopian. You couldn't make it up. I read the New York Times' "Trump Revealed"¹. It's a cracking good read; it's entertaining . . . until you remember that's it's not a story: it's real life. That's what reality is: playground taunts about who's got the biggest nuclear button and emerging countries dismissed as shit-holes. And utopian dreams don't change that: they are religious clap-trap.

¹ Kranish and Fisher [2016]

The Revd Matthew Pollard, Rector of Bridlington Priory

But Christianity doesn't offer utopian dreams. The assurance that God has finished everything through Jesus does not give us permission to live in a dream, so it's not clap-trap. The assurance that God has finished everything gives us hope, hope with which to endure the reality we encounter, and hope with which to engage with it. That hope compels us to challenge the narrative that the likes of Trump present to us. And that's no easy, no utopian thing.

The choir have just sung "The Little Door". The music was written by Howells. Now, if there were a poll of favourite choral composers, Howells would always be at the top of it; and if anyone disagrees, they're just wrong, bigly wrong. It was a setting, though, of a poem by Frances Chesterton. And it captures this idea that, for all the cuteness of the pastoral scene of the stable with the wise men offering gold, frankincense and myrrh, when the Christ-child reciprocates the offering, it is to compel us into a life of counter-cultural conflict:

For gold, He gives a keen-edged sword
(Defend with it Thy little Lord!)
For incense, smoke of battle red,
Myrrh for the honoured happy dead;
Gifts for His children, terrible and sweet,
Touched by such tiny hands and oh such tiny
feet.

But it is conflict for which we are equipped, through hope, with the knowledge that we are on the side that has already won.

Amen.