

Eleventh Sunday after Trinity 2019 (1.09.19)

Evensong

Isaiah 33: 13 – 22; John 3: 22 – 36

The trickiest thing about preparing a sermon for Evensong can often be trying to work out what on earth was going on in the minds of the committee who set the readings in the lectionary; and what possible connection there can be between the reading set for the Old Testament lesson and the reading set for the New Testament lesson.

This evening we have Isaiah 33, all about the judgment of the nations. Luckily we don't need to bother trying to work out which nations. Scholars have a field day on this chapter, but luckily this is a sermon rather than a Biblical Studies lecture, so we'll just content ourselves to note it's about God's judgment on the nations.

And then we've got John 3, all about the baptismal ministries of John the Baptist and of Jesus himself; which then develops into the sort of trope we're familiar with in John's Gospel about Jesus revealing everything he has seen of the Father because the Father has placed all things in his hands and all that sort of stuff.

And at first sight it's difficult to imagine that there can be any sort of thematic connection. But there is one. And it's to do with having a vision of the Kingdom of God.

The first half of the reading from Isaiah is about God's judgment. It's about it being like a devouring fire. It's about people who make selfish gain out of oppressing others, people who are corrupt, people who ignore bloodshed and evil; it's about people like that having cause to tremble because God's judgment is all about putting an end to things like that.

But then the second half is a vision of what things will be like after that has happened. The second half starts “Your eyes *will* see . . .” It’s all about the sort of regime, the sort of kingdom that will be established and inaugurated by God’s judgment. And it’s the sort of kingdom where there’s no conflict to be resolved either by war or by negotiated treaties. It’s about peace and stability. And of course, in this vision of God’s kingdom, there’s a complete absence of all the things that have been judged, including oppression and corruption.

Now, in John 3 there’s no mention of things like corruption and injustice and warfare. In fact this evening’s reading starts by polishing off any lingering question there might have been about the relative positions of John the Baptist and Jesus: it’s about reiterating that John merely prepared the way for Jesus and that Jesus is the real deal for which he set the scene.

But then it goes on to reflect on what this real deal is. Jesus is the real deal because he gives eternal life to those who believe in him. He gives the things of heaven, which have been placed in his hands by the Father, rather than merely earthly things to which John’s talk is inevitably restricted because of his inferiority to Jesus. And that means that a Jesus baptism – which we have come to understand is a baptism in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit – a Jesus baptism is the beginning of our eternal life. It’s about beginning to live in a way that has captured a vision of the Kingdom of God and is not restricted to the customs and the values of earthly life. It’s about being commissioned to live out an Isaiah 33 type vision of life.

The dilemma of the Christian life is wrestling with the tension, and trying to negotiate our way between the realities of living in a world in which there *is* warfare and corruption, and people pursue public policies to line their own pockets at the expense of the weakest

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members of society on the one hand; and, on the other hand, the reality that through baptism we have been admitted into membership of a kingdom in which no such things exist.

In his resignation speech to the House of Commons on the 1st November 1990, Sir Geoffrey Howe – the one whom standing at the dispatch box opposite had been described by Denis Healey as like being savaged by a dead sheep – Sir Geoffrey found his teeth and gave a truly savaging description of what it had been like to serve in Margaret Thatcher’s cabinet. The speech ended memorably as he spoke of a “conflict of loyalties with which I have myself wrestled for perhaps too long.”

If Christians feel that the dissonance between policies we see being pursued and the values of the Kingdom of God is getting greater and greater, we may need to conclude that we have ourselves wrestled for perhaps too long. Unfortunately nobody standing in this pulpit

or any other can pin point when that moment has been reached or prescribe what we should do to signify that that moment has been reached. It would be an abuse of my position if I said that Christians should be protesting in the streets against the prorogation of Parliament and a No-deal Brexit. But it is absolutely my duty to say that Christians need to decide for themselves whether this is the moment to do so.