



Remembrance Sunday

13 November 2016

The Bishop of Chichester's Sermon at Pusey House

The sense of solemnity that attends Remembrance Sunday tells us something of the legacy of the First World War and its impact on our own time.

The horror of that conflict has, in our own time, been sharpened by the recurrence of military intervention and death in Afghanistan and Iraq, and more recently by grotesque scenes of bombing homes, hospitals and family life in Syria.

Looking back to 1918, the biographer, James Pope-Hennessy, describes with sombre realism the euphoric mood on Armistice Day in London when in the “damp, fog-laden evening”, King George V and Queen Mary returned yet again to the balcony of Buckingham Palace to greet crowds that were louder, wilder, more vociferous than ever before. Pope-Hennessy notes that the King and Queen were “in fact saluting a new world...[they] would have to learn slowly for themselves just how disillusioned and how impatient that new, post-war world might prove” with its “driving wish for freedom from tradition and convention, whatever the cost”.

Pope-Hennessy notes but does not explore, one aspect of this new world that should be of interest to us as its inheritors, namely the sudden loss of a pattern

of Government that incardinated Christianity into its structures through the institution of monarchy.

The bloody and tumultuous years of 1914-18 brought to a rapid end the three historic imperial thrones of Austria, Germany and Russia, together with the abolition of several smaller Palatinate states, many of which had nurtured the Reformation and with whom England was closely bound through its royal family. In Catholic Austria, Protestant Germany, and Orthodox Russia a centuries old relationship between Church and State was ruptured in the loss of its emblem, the Sovereign. Interestingly, the National Anthem of each of those monarchies used to begin with the word “God”, as, indeed, ours still does.

But before I disappoint any of you who might belong to the Monarchist League or, conversely, I offend any full-blooded republicans, I want to stress that I am not utopian by nature and do not yearn romantically for any former dispensation of absolute power or applaud uncritically the constitution and State in Europe or the United Kingdom.

But I do want to take note of the convulsion that ended a thousand years of history. And in that context I want to acknowledge the disillusion and impatience that marked the beginning of the previous century, and which seems not to have dissipated as it has flowed into the present one. I want to know whether freedom from tradition and convention, whatever the cost, has improved the lot of every man and woman and child. Has it made us a happier nation? Do we ever stop to ask?

The gospel that we heard today begins to outline for us what a world would look like, freed from the destructive conventions of political and economic power. But it's a disturbing picture and Capernaum, where this snapshot is taken, is a place that sees the opportunity for something amazing, but spectacularly chooses not to pursue it.

Capernaum seems to be a place that lives with a deep, inner conflict. Jesus upbraids the town that has witnessed his teaching and ministry to the sick and outcast, because they have failed to respond to his mighty works with penitence and a change of lifestyle: “if the mighty works done in thee had been done in Sodom, it would have remained until this day” (Matthew 11.23).

The “mighty works” are the signs of healing and the forgiveness of sins. The crowds are drawn to Jesus because they find compassion in him; he is authentic, and as a result he exudes authority, a fact that disturbs the leadership of the local religious politics.

The self-interested and complaisant resistance of the religious elite draws a formidable denunciation from Jesus, recorded by both Matthew and Luke: “And thou, Capernaum, which art exalted unto heaven, shalt be brought down to hell” (Matthew 11.23; Luke 10.15).

This is powerful language about a dramatic reversal of fortunes that might appear to be in tune with the modern appetite for freedom from tradition, overturning the past, whatever the cost, described by Pope-Hennessy.

But today’s gospel points us to another detail about life in Capernaum that should also trouble us.

Jesus recognises the essential decency of the centurion. As a powerless, itinerant teacher, Jesus responds with humble acceptance to courtesy and the evidence of graciousness and religious intelligence in a senior military officer in one of the more brutal regimes of human history.

Luke paints the picture with greater detail: initially the centurion does not himself approach Jesus, out of respect, but sends elders of the Jews who tell Jesus that this centurion “loveth our nation, and he hath built our synagogue”. Jesus recognises the hallmark of authentic holiness in this person; he marvels at faith not yet fully defined but made explicit in word and behaviour, and he

asserts that this person, along with others from outside the confines of Israel, will indeed have a place in the kingdom of heaven, alongside the Patriarchs, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.

Capernaum will fall apart not merely because of its resistance to the evidence that Jesus is Emmanuel – God-with-us, but because its intelligentsia and the shapers of popular opinion saw in their own century the evidence of real virtue and a genuine capacity for holiness, but still failed to undergo that change of heart that is conversion to the gospel. This is a change of heart which generously rejoices because centurions, tax collectors and sinners can find admission to the banquet of heaven, and prostitutes and little children understand its inner dynamics of love, recovery and delight.

The impatience and disillusionment observed on Armistice Day 1918 have indeed continued to feature in our national life. But this must not deflect us as Christians today from our public articulation of the gospel vision for a society in which contentment, meaning and joy can flourish. In 2010, speaking in Westminster Hall Pope Benedict asked us this question about our life as a nation, “Where is the ethical foundation for political choices to be found?” And he went on to observe that “religion is not a problem for legislators to solve but a vital contributor to the national conversation”.

A little after that we celebrated the Queen’s diamond jubilee. And the then Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams, hosted a reception for one of Europe’s surviving Christian monarchs, at which he observed that “communities are united not by law alone but by a common language of affinities and symbols”. The Queen responded at this Lambeth Palace reception for Faith Leaders by making reference to the “beautiful sacred objects and holy texts” that are the patrimony of the world’s great faith traditions.

These observations take us back to the centurion who built a synagogue in Capernaum. He understood that social cohesion is formed in vital ways through the potency of religious symbol and sacred text. Today, cultures that prided themselves on having moved on, at any cost, from attachment to religion are being forced to reconsider its potential for cohesion, and the disintegration that can follow from the denial of how important and beneficial faith can be.

The Queen concluded her speech by noting that the role of the Church of England is not to defend Anglicanism but “to protect the free practice of all faiths in this country”. From a Sovereign who has made public her adherence to the Christian faith this is a bold statement. It resonates with a confidence in Jesus Christ, the way, the truth and the life, and the generosity of spirit that he himself exemplifies in the gospel.

We hear consistently of the hope for a better future that sustained those who died in two world wars; “When you go home tell them of us and say, for their tomorrow we gave out today”, as a common [Kohima] epitaph puts it. In our own day, let the Church’s honouring of their death be the sound of a voice that speaks for everything Capernaum rejected: the kingdom in which all virtue finds its reward, all nations find a home, and all men, women and children find life and dignity.