

‘Gathering society’s threads’ – A Sermon for Trinity VII

Deuteronomy 30.15–20

Philemon 1–21

Luke 14.25–33

With his greatest strategist working behind the scenes, it seems that Boris Johnson has completely misread his political situation and drastically misplayed his hand this week. The government has suffered more catastrophic defeats at the hands of Parliament, and Boris has had some unfriendly encounters during his walk-about, and drawn criticism during certain photo-opportunities. Politics is all about calculation, but getting such calculations wrong at such a high level and in such quick succession have been quite something to behold.

In today’s Gospel, Jesus warns those closest to him about miscalculating the cost of things: ‘for which of you, intending to build a tower, does not first sit down and estimate the cost, to see whether he has enough to complete it?’ If not, says Jesus, said person will be utterly ridiculed. It’s likely that Jesus has another political figure in mind in all this talk about building towers and not counting the cost. This was Herod the Great, a vindictive ego-maniac of a person, who had committed himself to a grand reconstruction of the Temple, a massive building programme that his sons and heirs were now working on. But what was it all for? Jesus understood the temple to be utterly compromised, a supposed meeting place with God and a gathering place for the people that had been overcome with political exclusivism and economic exploitation. Perhaps Jesus’ world and ours are not so different after all? In all his talk about discipleship, Jesus asks us to look at what we are constructing and why. Is everything I do just a matter of ego, or are we more into

building society together, a place in which all of us can flourish, not just those with the biggest mouths and the deepest pockets?

We also heard from the Children's Commissioner for England in a special report this week suggesting that it might be a good thing for schools to remain open at the end of the school day and during holidays to provide safe spaces for children to play. It seems we are building a society in which children are frightened about being chased in the streets, videoed by strangers and avoid being out after dark. Security seems to be the main issue here, but with Jesus' words ringing in our ears about what we are attempting to build and why, perhaps we need to be thinking about what kind of society we are called to create together, and why the sense of shared space is shrinking almost to nothing. In public spaces where only the loudest and most hostile can be heard, it is little wonder that our children are finding it hard to feel safe and be at home in our world.

It seems we are in danger of only creating contexts of polarised opposition and binary ideology. The ability to really listen to another, to take time to hear the voice of the stranger in our midst, is one that takes discipline, patience and not a little grace, but it seems to be an art that is disappearing from our public consciousness. In *Faith in the Public Square*, Rowan Williams asks how it might be possible to create a 'community of communities,' in which diversity and difference are celebrated and power is decentralised. He writes about how our public discourse has been thinned out, and that public debate and moral passion has been replaced by instant gratification and egocentric posturing. He writes beautifully about a Christian vision of society that seeks something more than human power and initiative, that sees a 'sacramental' quality in the material world around us, that you and me and the whole created world already have a depth of meaning, already point

to the divine, are already filled with possibility and beauty. This is a world and society in which trust is again possible, but, for the former archbishop, ‘a mythology of control and guaranteed security, combined with the fantasy that unlimited material growth is possible... has poisoned our social and political life.’ Echoing Jesus’ words from today’s gospel, he argues that we need to recover an ethical perspective and ask, ‘what we want growth for, what model of well-being we actually assume in our economics.’ It is this ethical perspective that the loudest proponents of both Brexit and Remain have been sadly lacking.

In our New Testament reading today, Paul asks a Christian slaveowner – yes, there were such things in Paul’s day and that should be enough for us to begin to ask radical questions about society and community – to welcome back his runaway slave, no longer as a slave, but now ‘on the basis of love,’ as a ‘beloved brother.’ Here Paul is drawing two people together, two people who shared only a relationship of inequality, of an imbalance of power, into a new kind of community in which old relationships based on outmoded and exclusive divisions now make way for the surprising freedom of love. Philemon now has something to learn from the slave Onesimus, and slavery is to be recast in terms of gift. In the same way each of us is called to question and transform the relationships we are in, the society we are creating, away from inequality, economic or political dominance and subservience, and towards the perfection of love. This will take courageous, imaginative action, but in the end that is what love is all about.

Today we are celebrating with Fr David as he marks his 40th anniversary as a priest, and I do hope you will join us after mass for a glass of some bubbles and a bite of something to eat. But what is it that a priest is called to do? Perhaps in light of what I have said so far, it is important to say that one of the primary roles of a

priest is to gather a people together. We come to church as a fragmented, divided and frightened people, divided against each other and divided within ourselves, but through the priest God gathers us into a new kind of oneness, not a unity based on the assertion of power or fear, but one built through the gentleness of love. Here we are forgiven our sins, woven back together again and join our voices one with another to sing of the beauty of God, the beauty of our world, the beauty of love. In a world threatening to tear everything apart into isolated and lonely fragments, this kind of gathering is finally the only human activity that really matters. AMEN.