

Trinity 8 – 21.07.2024

Last week I spoke about the responsibility we all share to build God's kingdom.

It seems in this week's readings we are asked to think about what we are called to build.

It's something I have been pondering this past week.

This is a glorious building. But at my licensing the Bishop repeated the line about this being the biggest sandcastle in Hove.

And glorious though it is, I could quite cheerfully throttle the men who designed it and decided using local sandstone for a building mere blocks from the sea was a good idea.

This past week I was taken by Peter to see the consequences of that decision – and the real challenge of keeping this house of God in one piece.

None of what we do, who we are, or what we believe can be easily separated from what has come before us, and part of our responsibility as we work out what we are building as the kingdom builders in this place, is to look after what has been left to us by those who came before.

That works for buildings.

It works for other things too.

This week I listened to an extended interview with Harriet Harman¹, mother of the house in the last parliament, meaning she was the longest-serving female MP in the house.

Her career has been shaped by her deeply-held feminist convictions, which, especially in her early days as an MP, put her at odds with members of her own party, as well as the Conservatives.

She spoke about the evolution of the women's movement, and about how there were times before, as there are now, when the rights of different groups were pitted against each other.

Harman's contention was that it was crucial to allow space for honest conversation, dialogue which led to teasing out what the next step could be, to move everyone forward, to compromise and make space for all so that could happen.

We build on what we have been given by those who came before us. But evolution and growth does not necessarily mean utterly rejecting what has come before, but sometimes we come to a place where we look and realise that we have moved on.

Inherent in her argument was I think a rejection of a binary right or wrong, them or us.

¹ The News Agents. 'Harriet Harman on misogyny, trans rights and whether Tony Blair was a feminist' 19.07.24. Global Player Original Podcast.

That binary, that tribalism is not confined to the women's movement and trans rights, nor is it limited to parliamentary, British or US politics: it exists within the church as well – defining ourselves in contrast to others.

One of the hardest but most important things we can do, if we are seeking to build something, is to work out what we need to tear down – walls between us and others, walls which may make us feel safer, but ultimately harm everyone.

This is something we can do together, but it does rely on us taking our courage in our hands.

Before I left York a member of the congregation put a book in my hand with a note saying that this book had really helped her, and she hoped I found it helpful too, as would whomever I handed it next.

The book is called 'faith beyond resentment'. In it James Allison, a Roman Catholic theologian writing in the early 2000s, sets out to re-imagine the Catholic faith beginning with himself and his own experience.

However in addition to detailing his own experience of living as a gay Catholic, he also considers stories and figures in the Old and New Testament, who have had to reckon with the dismantling of what they consider holy, and learn to follow God in a new way.

This was true for the people of Israel, exiled, with the temple in ruins – all that was sacred to them removed from their lives. How were they to rebuild?

A significant part of what we read in the Old Testament is theology being worked out in this time of desolation.

It turns out that YHWH is not like other gods, to be contained by grand temples and beautiful ceremony. YHWH is rather present in the still small voice, in the silence.

He also talks about it in relation to Paul.

"All of Paul's preaching, all of his theology, is characterised by the process of the collapse of a certain sacred structure, and by the slow discovery of the perspective given by a new focus on Yahweh, the Pauline equivalent of Elijah's still small voice."²

Before we talk about the Church All Saints, or the wider church, we need to begin with ourselves.

We need to begin by asking what God will for us as a beloved child. We need to carefully examine our assumptions about how we live our lives, how we negotiate with God and with ourselves about what is good, what is enough, what is failure.

We need to be prepared to be startled, maybe grieved, but I think ultimately liberated by what we find.

² Allison, James (2001) Faith beyond resentment: fragments catholic and gay. Darton, Longman and Todd Ltd. London.

Around 12 years ago I sat in a therapist's consulting room and experienced a theological revelation.

I realised that whilst intellectually I believed in a God who was love I didn't believe it in my gut.

And so I was withholding a part of myself because I had been given so much already, why should I trouble God with this last thing.

I realised that I was not trusting God with my heart and my guts and my Self.

My gut finally caught up with my head.

These are challenges still being faced by queer people in the Church and in wider society.

But it is a universal challenge too.

Am I truly safe?

Am I truly enough?

All of us face times when we feel inadequate in the face of what life throws at us.

And if it is true for us, it's true for the seemingly confident and serene as well.

It's true for those who wield tremendous power, and those who seem to have it all under control.

The walls we build, the structures we create, whether about power and constitution, or sandstone and glass, can make us feel safe.

But they can also be time-consuming and costly.

And they can work as barriers to separate us from others, and limit our vision, our imagination, our sense of what is possible.

They and we must have the courage to tear them down, metaphorically if not literally (I'm NOT advocating tearing down All Saints' and starting again) so that we can rediscover what is at the heart of our humanity.

We do not worship structures.

We worship Jesus Christ, crucified, risen and ascended Lord, who LOVES you with a fierce and abiding love.

He sees you as you are.

He has chosen you to be a member of the household of God, to be a living stone.

And he has done the same for those you disagree with – those who feel far off from you, as well as those who are near.

This is the God whose kingdom we are called to build.

This is the God who recreates, redeems and sustains us.