

Second Sunday before Lent

A sermon preached by the Rector, the Very Reverend Tim Barker, at the parish church of St Andrew Guernsey on Sunday 24 February 2019

Readings: Revelation 4 and Luke 6 vv 22-25

'Who then is this, that he commands even the winds and the water, and they obey him?'

In one way, it is not surprising that the disciples have this reaction when Jesus calms the raging sea. But Jesus' perception of his role and identity is seen not as the exercise of power but in service. We are moving towards Lent, a season in which we will have a growing awareness of that great truth that 'the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many.'

There are thirty-three days to Brexit, when the United Kingdom is due to leave the European Union. This is not the place to comment on whether this is right or wrong, but I cannot avoid the conclusion that the government of the United Kingdom is not in the place it might have hoped to be. By any stretch of the imagination, it is not in a good place, with the fracture lines in the two main political parties becoming more and more evident. It is hard to avoid the conclusion that, whilst the rich and powerful will probably survive, the future prosperity and welfare of the majority of ordinary people is less certain than we might have anticipated and the prospects for some of the poorest and most disadvantaged are rather more alarming. This is indeed something to inform and guide our prayer.

I returned last night from four days in London, attending the Church of England's General Synod. Alongside the necessary legislative business, we had some interesting and constructive debate about mission and evangelism, with some insights that will be helpful for us here in Guernsey. And yesterday afternoon, the Archbishop of Canterbury opened a debate about the 'State of the Nation'.

The motion that General Synod passed, more or less unanimously, was this:

That this Synod, knowing through the experiences of parishes across the country that social divisions feel more entrenched and intractable than for many years, and concerned at the divisions within the major political parties which are stifling the emergence of a hopeful and viable vision for the common good in our communities:

(a) call upon every diocese and parish regularly to hold in prayer their local MPs and politicians and the members of Her Majesty's Government and civil servants, seeking God's strength and wisdom for the responsibilities they bear;

(b) reaffirm the Christian commitment to putting the voices of the poor and marginalised at the heart of the nation's concerns; and

(c) call upon the nation's leaders, drawing on Christian hope and reconciliation, to work together for that common good at this time of division.

The story is told, and it may even be true, of the elderly parson leaning out of his prayer desk to ask a question of the parish clerk about whether he should say the prayer in the Book of Common Prayer which is to be used when Parliament is sitting. 'Ted, should I pray for Parliament?' 'I'd pray for them anyway, Rector,' came the reply. 'They're a rum lot.'

One suspects that the parish clerk might have had some sympathy with those in this island who mutter about 'the worst States ever.' But that is not a particularly helpful

response to what we see around us. Engagement with the wider life of society and praying for our leaders is an important duty for Christians.

In his speech at the General Synod, the Archbishop quoted Edmund Burke, a Member of Parliament in the eighteenth century, who, in a speech in the House of Commons, spoke of the church,

'which says that their God is love, that the very vital spirit of their institution is a charity; a religion which so much hates oppression that when the God, whom we adore, appeared in human form, he did not appear in a form of greatness and majesty, but in sympathy with the lowest of the people – and thereby made it a firm and ruling principle that their welfare was the object of all government.'

This is as true for the Church here in Guernsey in the twenty first century as it was in London in the eighteenth century.

To quote the Archbishop again,

'Since the arrival of Christianity on these shores, the Christian narrative has responded to the issues and injustices of the age – seen in the stories of Elizabeth Fry and Florence Nightingale, Wilberforce and Wesley, William Booth and William Temple.'

'We need now to reimagine those values to respond to modern problems, a narrative [which] captures the imagination, which gives rise to new and exciting possibilities, and is capable of bringing out the best in us and giving hope to all.'

Last July, we saw the publication of the Guernsey Faith Action Audit, which demonstrated the social impact and the economic value of all that the churches and the other faith groups do in our island community. Whilst there was much to encourage, there are still many opportunities for the churches in Guernsey to make a positive contribution to making Guernsey a better place and to add value to our community. I hope that this may be one of the outcomes of the Mission Action Planning, on which Juliette is leading in this parish.

The abiding impression from the gospel reading today is not so much the disciples' lack of faith as the awe and trembling with which they look at Jesus with new eyes. 'Who then is this?' – a question that is so important as the disciples grow in understanding of the true nature and identity of Jesus. This passage directly anticipates Jesus' question at Caesarea Philippi: 'Who do you say that I am?'

God our Creator is present in his creation, and in subsequent generations the Church has often thought of herself as a boat tossed by turbulent and threatening waters. In such circumstances, we rejoice that Jesus is in the midst of the storms with us – that ours is not an absent, far-away God.

The song at the end of the New Testament reading, from the Revelation to St John, praises God for his work in creation. It may originally have been a strong counter-blast the emperor-worship of the time – but to the Church, whether under persecution in the first century or battered by the winds and waves of contemporary life, the message is one of simple and profound encouragement: *Jesus is Lord*. As we pray for the government of the United Kingdom and for our deputies and for all who hold positions of power and responsibility in this bailiwick, we hold before us the overarching sovereignty of God, who calls us to work with him for the 'common good'.