

31<sup>st</sup> July 2016 – 10<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Trinity

Ecclesiastes 1: 2, 12-14 & 2: 18-23; Colossians 3: 1-11; Luke 12: 13-21

I want to ask a difficult question, but first I must make it absolutely clear that I do not know the answer – it would be quite wrong for me or anybody else standing here to pretend that they do. The question is: how would Jesus have voted in the referendum? Would he have voted at all? More to the point, what would he say if we were to ask him now how we should be behaving in light of the result, with all the thoughts it provokes about who we are, about our place and our responsibility in this troubled world?

There are lots of other questions you could ask about things that are going on in the world – about Trident, about Syria, about what Jesus would say should be done about the refugees stuck in the camps around Calais – questions not just about why things happen, but about how we should respond. And while we may not expect clear answers – from preachers or from Jesus – it is vitally important that we bring the questions into this place along with our perplexity, our excitement or our despair, so we can shine the light of scripture on them.

So what light do today's readings throw on the referendum?

We start with some odd snippets from the beginning of the Book of Ecclesiastes: "Vanity of vanities – all is vanity". Does our new Foreign Secretary spring to mind?! But hang on a minute, this is 'vain' not in the sense of 'self-regarding' but rather 'pointless' – a "chasing after wind". At one level that sums up the gloomy message of Ecclesiastes: 'Life is not fair – we've all got to die one day – so what is the point?' Yet Ecclesiastes is stuffed with wonderful poetry, including the most famous bit: "For everything its season and for every activity under heaven its time..." It's a love letter of regret for a beautiful world which we cannot keep. That's the positive message: that we need to learn to find joy in the world as we are given it today without trying to store it up for the future. If we despair at the state of the world, perhaps the most helpful thing we can do is to refuse to be depressed – to deliberately take joy in the world as we find it – something for me to work on!

Next, St Paul. He's a great man for lists, especially lists of ways of being naughty – you do wonder what was going on that he had to write this. When life is settled and normal, when the tide is in and the sun is shining as it is now, these things can seem obvious and trite even. But when the tide goes out they mean much more. "You must get rid of anger, malice, abusive language ... do not lie to another..." – quite topical really.

I have often wondered how, in 1930s Germany, an ordinary citizen like me could have known when it was time to call a halt, to go against the social norm, to disobey. Thankfully, we are nowhere near that situation today, but it would be foolish to think that just because we are British – or English or Irish or whatever you like to think you are, what happened in Nazi Germany couldn't happen here. One way to be prepared is to revisit those lists of the obvious, make them modern, make them real. Perhaps that's what the bishops are doing in their rather forbiddingly titled "Episcopal Guidance following the result of the EU Referendum" ... And it's a fascinating exercise to see what happens if you modernise the list at the end of that Colossians reading: "In Christ there is no... ..".

But what would Jesus himself have said if we had had the courage to ask him, before the referendum, which way we should vote? Would he have ducked the issue? Would he have said, 'It really doesn't matter – there are more important things'? Would he have said, 'It really does matter, but you must decide for yourself'? Or might he have told a parable very similar to today's, unkindly accusing us of greed, of being motivated, whichever side we were on, by concern to protect our own very comfortable way of life? Suppose we replied, 'OK, OK, forget me – forget my family – I really want to know what is for the best, what it means to be "rich towards God" in the real world out there'. Might Jesus's heart then have warmed to us as it did to the rich young ruler in another story?

And suppose we did not go away with a heavy heart, but instead accepted Jesus's challenge, sold everything, gave up all the things we are attached to, and followed him – where does the story take you next in your imagination – what would it have meant to actually follow Jesus?

In my imagination, my working out of the story – yours might be quite different – two things would happen. First, I would have to learn to live up close with Jesus's disciples – a ragbag of people very different from me – some of them might well have been bearded but they certainly weren't Guardian readers...

Secondly, I would have to get serious about learning to pray which Jesus did an awful lot. We had lesson number one a fortnight ago with Mary and Martha – lesson number two last week with the Lord's Prayer, and "Ask and it shall be given..." The lesson I need next is how to pray for other people – not just for individuals that I know, but for the world – and not just reminding God of the headlines, still less analysing it all and trying to work out the answer – but rather sitting with all these stories we hear about the world, offering them up, sharing God's care, waiting upon him. For I believe that when you do that, the whole world begins to look different. You almost begin to see round the back of things, to a divine economy which does not work like ours at all: what should matter becomes obvious and you don't have to go searching for joy. But it is not easy, and it takes more courage and discipline than I can often find.

I started with the question, how would Jesus have voted in the referendum? I end up with some well worn words of T S Eliot:

"I said to my soul, be still, and wait without hope  
For hope would be hope for the wrong thing; wait without love  
For love would be love of the wrong thing; there is yet faith  
But the faith and the love and the hope are all in the waiting.  
Wait without thought, for you are not ready for thought:  
[Then, only then] shall the darkness be the light and the stillness the dancing."

Amen

Robert Mitchell: 31.7.16