

Sermon for Chrism Eucharist March 2018

“Therefore, since through God’s mercy we have this ministry, we do not lose heart.” (2 Cor.4:1)

St. Paul experienced and describes for us a ministry context which seems impossibly difficult. In today’s passage he describes himself as hard-pressed on every side, perplexed, persecuted, struck down, always carrying in his body the death of Jesus. Paul preached a gospel that was foolishness to the Greeks and a stumbling block for Jews. As a result, he faced opposition and hardship almost everywhere he went. No wonder that he was acutely aware that the treasure of the gospel was carried in mere clay pots or earthen vessels.

This struck me as a good way to introduce a sermon for our Chrism Eucharist when we gather together to reflect on our ministries, to encourage one another and to recommit ourselves to our work. Because I have become increasingly convinced that we face, though in a very different way from Paul, a deeply challenging context. Today provides an important opportunity to reflect on some of the big cultural forces that are shaping our contexts, to try to understand them better and to think about what we the church have to offer in response.

David Ford, in his book ‘The Shape of Living’ talks about ‘overwhelmings’: those forces far bigger than ourselves in the face of which we feel small, weak and inadequate. There are three in particular, identified by the American theologian Gregory Jones, which powerfully affect us all in the present age.

The first of these is globalisation. People are becoming much more mobile, modern communications have shrunk the size of the global village; a generation ago my family was entirely white British but my oldest daughter is married to a Hong Kong Chinese; my second daughter is departing shortly to live in Boston and my Son lives in Glasgow but is going out with a Ghanaian student who is living in Paris. There are many more people who, in Teresa May’s rather infamous phrase belong everywhere and nowhere. And we mostly minister to networks not to local communities.

The second overwhelming force is technology. This includes communications, but also artificial intelligence and robotics. Social media now dominate the way news is transmitted; people are spending far more time in front of computer screens to the point that even Silicon Valley executives are worrying about the social implications. Artificial intelligence and brain chip implants may soon start to blur the distinction between what is human and what is not. Driverless cars will be a reality soon. Many of the jobs currently done by humans, taxi driving, book-keeping, some kinds of surgery will be done and done better by computers and robots. And the lives of most clergy are dominated by email.

The third force, and I’m sorry for the ugly word, is financialisation. By this I mean the dominance of money and the movement of money. Today’s banks do not merely provide a service to industry they are an industry in themselves. Those working in sectors such as manufacturing or retail know that the drive to generate shareholder value means a relentless pressure towards increased profitability and a focus on the bottom line. The 2008 financial crash was caused by the commodification of American sub-prime mortgages. The lives of people in Greece have been dominated by sovereign debt questions over which they had little control. And very frequently when I visit a chaplaincy they want to talk to me not so much about prayer but about money.

Globalisation, technology and financialisation. These three forces have come to dominate our lives in the last 25 years. But let's put those into a broader historical and religious sweep. Charles Taylor, in his long book 'A Secular Age', charts the relentless progress of secularisation through the Reformation and the Enlightenment and over 500 years. I don't recommend reading the whole book, but the argument is summed up in his first sentence. Namely, that in 1500 it was virtually impossible not to believe in God, whereas by the year 2000 even the believers usually act as if there is no God. The story is told in a different but equally powerful way by Alasdair MacIntyre in his book, *After Virtue*, which charts the breakdown in shared understandings of human purpose and moral reasoning so that individuals are left doing whatever seems right to them in their own eyes.

No wonder, then, that the future does not seem what it used to be. No wonder that people are bewildered. No wonder that we experience a sense of spiritual wilderness, both outside and inside the church.

Actually the people of God have known wilderness before. Most notably, of course, when the people of Israel left Egypt and journeyed towards the promised land. And of course, the big temptation for the people of Israel in the desert was....to turn around and go back. In the book of Numbers chapter 14 we read that the whole community raised their voices and wept aloud. They grumbled against Moses and Aaron and the whole assembly said to them: 'If only we had died in the desert. Let us choose a leader and go back to Egypt.' And this event is held out as a terrible warning in scripture. Because of course, Egypt was slavery and death. And so the book of Hebrews exhorts the New Testament church: 'Today if you hear his voice, harden not your hearts, as you did in the rebellion....for 40 years long was I grieved with this generation.'

We live in a time of wilderness. It may last a long time. 40 years maybe? Probably as long as all our active ministries. But the great mistake in a time of wilderness is just to want to go back. Politically this is expressed in slogans like: 'Take back control. Make America Great Again.' Justin Welby in his very recent book 'Re-imagining Britain' (p19) talks of the risk that a post-Brexit Britain will express itself in introspection, xenophobia and self-pity manifesting itself in hate crimes and growing intolerance. Believe me, this is a real risk.

But. The despair, gloom, cynicism easily generated by the wilderness experience is not the last word. The right choice for the people of Israel in the desert, which they eventually took, was to press on towards the promised land. St. Paul in his letter to the Corinthians describes how he is hard pressed but not crushed; perplexed but not in despair; persecuted but not abandoned; struck down but not destroyed. Carrying around the death of Jesus in his body so that the life of Jesus could be revealed in his body. So he does not lose heart. And St. Paul is relentlessly, astonishingly and consistently a bringer of hope.

Charles Dickens opens his 'Tale of Two Cities' with a famous quote: 'It was the best of times, it was the worst of times...it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the Season of Light, it was the Season of Darkness.' And so, I believe the current season of wilderness is, for the church also a season of great opportunity.

Why? Because fundamentally God is faithful, even if the gods of this present age, as they had in St. Paul's age, have blinded people's eyes to him. Because God became human in Jesus and Jesus remains a powerfully attractive person, full of grace and truth. Because, amidst all the other 'overwhelmings', I believe the most profound experience is to be overwhelmed by God

– this is simply the most disorientating and transformative overwhelming there is. Of course St. Paul’s own life was turned around in this way, and the lives of countless millions of people since, including many we ourselves will know in our own churches.

Beyond this, I believe the church has an especial relevance to our time. MacIntyre concludes ‘After Virtue’ by saying ‘what matters at this stage is the construction of local forms of community within which civility and the intellectual and moral life can be sustained through the new dark ages which are already upon us. We are waiting for a new – doubtless very different – St. Benedict.’ And of course, this is precisely what we are about. Our pastoral and spiritual work is to create those local communities in which human beings truly thrive and find fulness of life. We are concerned with building new religious communities out of the fragments.

There is a deep loneliness in the world, especially amongst older people. There is rising anxiety and mental illness amongst young people. There is disenchantment that the promises of a consumer society have not brought happiness. People are tired of being bombarded by imagery and persuasive messaging. Globalisation has brought dislocation.

In this context, the church offers, we offer: home - a spiritual home. Church is a place where everyone can belong, where all can give and receive. In a polarised world, the church brings people together across ages, educational backgrounds and races. That is truly a remarkable thing. And as the sense of yearning in our contemporary society grows so the ‘offer’ of the church grows in attractiveness.

But it is not quite so easy as that. The church, the message of the gospel faces numerous obstacles. Some we create ourselves, by the wounds we inflict on ourselves. But there are others too: the sense that Christianity is part of the past not the future; a sense of ‘irrelevance’ to modern life and modern questions; a widespread distrust of institutions of all kinds; a sense that religion is part of the problem not the solution.

So those of us who preach the gospel or who are entrusted with leadership must find ways of telling an old story in new ways so that it surprises and delights. This is much more than just good P.R. Theologians talk about ‘traditioned innovation’ or ‘faithful improvisation’. This is a powerful concept. I learnt the organ when I was younger...grades 1 to 8. It was only at Grade 8 that you were examined on improvisation. Because you first needed to learn all the techniques and rules of harmony in Grades 1 to 7. So for us preachers and evangelists: do we know the tradition well enough that we can mine it for the stories that will truly connect; are we able to adapt the tradition so it strikes a sceptical world with newness and authenticity? In the wilderness, can we connect with people’s deep spiritual need?

And finally, as I conclude, I urge all of us not to lose heart or to become hard hearted. To us is entrusted a great treasure, a gospel of hope that is never needed more than in dark times. To all of us, who live in a secular age I invite you to reflect on this challenge: ‘do I live in such a way that my life wouldn’t make sense if God did not exist?’ And may God give us the grace and the wisdom to know how to declare the gospel afresh in this our generation. So that with St. Paul we may say, “since through God’s mercy we have this ministry, we do not lose heart.”

Bishop Robert Innes

