

Sunday 19th May 2019, Easter V

Baruch 3:9-15, 32-4:44; Acts 11:1-18; John 13:31-35: The Light to the Nations

Words not from one of our readings this morning, but from the prophet Isaiah:

And now the Lord says to me: it is too light a thing that you should be my servant

To raise up the tribes of Jacob, and to restore the survivors of Israel.

I will give you as a light to the nations,

That my salvation may reach to the ends of the earth.

A light to the nations. That, Isaiah saw, was to be the point of Israel. The point of being God's chosen people. They were chosen to be a beacon, to be a shining city set on a hill, that the whole world could look at and see, yes, there's how to live. That's what human beings were made to be, living lives of justice and peace and togetherness, where every bit of private and public life is shot through with righteousness. Israel was to show the world that there was a better way to be. In the end, the prophet dreamed – God said – the Gentiles would come running to her, to join with her in living under God, on the day when the whole world became his kingdom.

Which necessarily, if a bit paradoxically, meant for the moment that Israel had to keep her distance from the nations. The whole point that she was different: splendidly, beautifully different – living a different kind of life to whatever the latest Empire wanted to impose on everyone: be it Persian, be it Greek, be it Roman. There was all kinds of pressure on the Jews to just give up and blend in, to just be another global citizen. Don't circumcise your children. Eat the pork, offer sacrifices to the Gods or the Emperor ... just be like us, said the wider world again and again, sometimes warm, friendly tones, sometimes breathing threats and murder. And again and again, Israel had to remind herself: no. We were made for something better than this. This Empire is not's God's Kingdom, we're not meant to settle down here, we've got to stay different. That's what's going on in our first reading from the book of Baruch: keep the law, O Israel. *All who hold her fast will live, those who forsake her will die. Turn, O Jacob, and take her; walk towards the shining of her light. Do not give your glory to another, or your advantages to an alien people. Happy are we, O Israel, for we know what is pleasing to God. Keep the law.*

Which is why Acts Chapters 10 and 11 are so full of shock. The first Christians were good Jews. They came from just that empire-defying, light to the nations way of being God's

people. 'We will not cave in' was their motto. And then, just like that, here's their leader, Peter, caving: sitting down and breaking bread with Gentiles. Breaking bread means breaking down: breaking down all the differences, all the barriers. It means putting people on the same level, it means merging into them, surely to goodness it means what Baruch condemned: giving your glory to another, your advantages to an alien people. Not, please note, that the people who condemned Peter were necessarily saying that he shouldn't have preached to Gentiles, or that Gentiles shouldn't have come to follow Jesus. Of course he should, and of course they could – but they had to become Jews first. They had to be circumcised, they had to refuse the pork, they had to keep the Law. They have to keep the Law, because if you don't keep the Law, what makes you different from the world? What makes you the light to the nations? You're just another part of the darkness. The whole point of God's people is that *we're different*.

So thought Peter's critics. And in one respect, they were absolutely right. Sadly, we're not sure that the book in the New Testament called the First Letter of Peter actually was written by Peter, but whoever it was puts the matter brilliantly. God's people, he says to the Church, you are aliens and exiles in this world (1 Peter 2:11). You are not meant to blend in. You are not meant to conform. And that is the constant note of all the New Testament writers. And for ourselves as a Church that means we need to be very suspicious of calls from the world to 'get with the programme', as David Cameron once put it. The programme might be right, but it might also be terribly wrong. What the wider culture thinks is not a reliable guide to how Christians should act. That, however, is for another sermon.

This morning though, the key question is this: if you're not going to maintain the distinctiveness of God's people by keeping the Law – by circumcision and refusing pork and all those things stand for – how will you do it? How will the world know that you are God's people? Cue John Chapter 13: *By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love one for another. A new commandment I give unto you: love one another. Just as I have loved you, so you ought to love one another.* Forget foreskins. Forget food. You are to be different, and the world will know you're different, but they'll know it by looking at your life together. And they'll see there a togetherness, a total, radical commitment to each other which just isn't to be found elsewhere. They'll see love.

And when the Bible talks of love, it is not being soppy or sentimental. It's not saying we must all be in love with each other, or even perhaps particularly friendly with each other – though no doubt, that would help. No, it is much more demanding and practical and brilliant

than that. *As I have loved you, so you ought to love one another.* As I have loved you ... in other words, this community is to be made up of people who do for each other what Jesus did for them. That is, pour everything out: our wealth, our energy, our time, our attention, our prayer, everything about us re-orientated away from ourselves and into each other. Pour it out to the point of a Cross.

So is there someone among us who desperately, desperately needs money? That's fine, others of us have it, and we will give, freely, because that's what Jesus did. (And that, my friends, is what planned giving and parish share is all about).

Is there someone who is just lonely, who's calling out for time and friendship and inclusion, to know that they're wanted, that they can bring joy to others? We give that worth to others, because Jesus gave it to us.

Is there someone here crippled by shame? Who needs to know that whatever has been done to them, whatever they have done, that they are precious in God's sight, and that they should stand up straight as a child of Abraham? This people will help you stand up, because that is what Jesus did for us.

Now, I know. I know we are some distance from being that people. I know that is not how church actually is, so much of the time. Sometimes our failure is so dramatic and total God must weep, and anyone who actually gets what church is must weep. But look, this is the vision. This is what is struggling to be born, this is what we're at least *trying* to do – and just think of the wonder of it. The light to the nations! The people that say to a world obsessed with power and competition and success that there's a different way to be. The people with Jesus at their centre who pour themselves out for others ... and not just the others who look like they might be worth it: the interesting, attractive, competent, exciting others.

No....Poured out like Jesus for awkward ones, for difficult ones, for slow and stupid ones, ones with addictions and hang-ups, the failures and the lost and the wicked. For *all of us*. Imagine a community where *all of us* are so loved that we begin to love back, where all of us get the dignity of really, really mattering, of contributing. Imagine that, and you're imagining God's Church, the light to the nations. And it's not just imaginary: it's what we're trying to grow, trying to make real, right here, right now. And for that we give thanks to God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.