

Epiphany III, January 26th 2020

Isaiah 9:1-4; Matt.4:12-23

Land of Zebulun, Land of Naphtali

I hope you enjoyed singing that hymn, because we are unlikely to ever sing it again.

Look again at that third verse: 'how purely hath thy speech come down, from man's primeval youth; how grandly hath thine empire grown, of freedom, love and truth.'

Just in case it has escaped anyone, realise that Samuel Johnson is there talking about the Church. The sublime, beautiful, holy Church, shining in the darkness.

Now perhaps if Mr Johnson was here, he'd tell us that he didn't mean any actually real, concrete Church. Like this one. No, he was talking about some abstract, ideal church behind them all – some kind of spiritual, invisible, pure church.

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The real Church is not an empire of freedom, love, and truth. Those things are not our strong points *at all*.

Many of you will have watched the recent documentary about Peter Ball, the former Bishop of Lewes, then Gloucester, who used his position to sexually abuse many young men. That was appalling enough, but the documentary also showed how the Church authorities, up to and including the then Archbishop of Canterbury, bent over backwards to protect Ball. They refused to believe victims. When that became impossible, they tried to minimise the abuse. To the extent, even, of hiding evidence from the police. One survivor said that taught him the truth about the Church: 'from outside it is so beautiful. It has such wonderful stories, it promises such wonderful things, but if you strip away the veneer, it is a cold machine... Its whole reason for being is to maintain itself ... it's not about love, compassion, kindness, sympathy or any human quality like that.'

And if that was not grimness enough, tomorrow marks Holocaust Memorial Day. Of course, the Church of England was never actually put to the test during the Holocaust. We never had to decide whether we would give up the Jews. But make no mistake, by and large, with very few honourable exceptions, the record of the Christian Church during the Holocaust stinks. And that is just in those few years. The bigger truth is that the only reason the Nazis could kill six million Jews is that for centuries the whole Christian Church, Catholic and Protestant, had taught Jew-hatred. It wasn't Hitler who first made Jews wear special badges, or live in ghettos, or who first dreamt of making whole countries Jew-free. All that was Christian centuries before it was Nazi – and we English Christians were as bad as the rest of them.

So much for the empire of freedom, love and truth. Indeed, the Christian Church is such a terrible failure that it is well worth posing the question – has it actually *disproved* the Gospel? Part of the Gospel is, is it not, that through Jesus God is at work in the world, at work in us, changing us, making us more like Himself, filling us with his love and joy and power? Well, quite how terrible does the Church get to be before any fair observer would say this cannot be true – that the Church is *not* the people of God, it's just another failure? Indeed, it's worse, because it pretended to be something else? If the sexual abuse scandal, and Holocaust Memorial Day, do not make you ask that question then frankly you have not considered them deeply enough.

Such questions are not new ones. They go right back, at least eight centuries before Jesus, to our first reading today from the prophet Isaiah. Like the Church, Israel was meant to be the light to the nations. It was meant to be where the world could look and see what it was to be a people governed by God's laws, a society of peace and justice, organised love. And instead, the Assyrian invader has swept into the North, into the old tribal areas of Zebulun and Naphtali. He has burned the cities, deported the population, settled his own people there, changed the religion ... Israel is lost. The dream has died. And worse, Isaiah knows why. Israel collapsed because it had decayed first from within – it had allowed injustice and poverty and abuse to breed within it. It had revealed itself as just another failure. Not God's God's people in God's country. Just the same old human darkness.

And in that context, Isaiah speaks God's Word. He speaks of a light that will begin shining in Zebulun and Naphtali. In the most wrecked, most abandoned, most overrun by invaders place, a light will begin to shine. And it will bring freedom. It will begin the work of restoring what seemed lost forever, of making broken Israel God's nation once again.

And what Isaiah dreamed of, says St. Matthew, became real, became actual in Jesus. Indeed, became real in a more radical, comprehensive sense than Isaiah had dared imagine. Forget Zebulun and Naphtali: God's salvation is bigger and broader and deeper than that. God in Jesus is going to the heart of desolation. To the most abandoned place, the ultimate place of over-running by the invaders, not just puny human invaders – Romans, this time, not Assyrians – but the cosmic dark powers behind them, Sin and Evil and Death, the powers wrongfully occupying God's world. When Jesus goes to the Cross, it is God going to the heart of darkness.

And what happens there is the great mystery. God goes into the heart of darkness, and He burns it up. Turns it around. Triumphs over it. The resurrection of the crucified Jesus is the central moment of all history: it is where God once and for all overthrows the invaders. Where he says to Sin and Death and Despair – your time ends here. A light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it. More than that: the Resurrection of Jesus says that one day all darkness will be swallowed up in glorious light.

One day. But we live in the in-between times. The Resurrection has happened, but the glorious day – not yet. And so everything about us is marked by in-betweenness. We are people of grace and hope, but also of anti-semitism. Of sexual perversion, of cover-ups and shame. There is no escape from that in church. Everything in the world is also here, and sometimes worse here because it hides under a beautiful surface. If there is one thing the Peter Ball case should have taught us, it is that everything *can* happen here – right here, in this parish - and that even those who look the best can be the worst. That is why, incidentally, we are now so emphatic about safeguarding. We live in a deeply sinful Church, and people need protecting.

But thankfully, the Gospel is not about the Church. The Church is a place of in-betweenness. We are a mix of old and new, sin and grace, death and life. Jesus Christ is not in-between. In him, there is no darkness at all. The whole point of the Gospel is that He is pure beauty and brilliance. There is no failure in Him. If there was, then He would not redeem Zebulun and Naphtali, He would not raise up the ruins – He would simply be part of it. He would sink into the same dark swamp we drown in. The Gospel is that He is different. Human, yes, but *fully* human – human without any of the failure, any of the sin, any of the death. Human as humans were meant to be, and not as we twisted ourselves into. We are defective, weak, damaged humans: he is the Image of God. And so when He descends into the mire – when He dies on the Cross – He is strong enough, deep enough, rich enough not to be conquered, but to conquer. The brilliance and beauty of Jesus is such that He does the swallowing: He is not swallowed up by sin and death, but swallows them up. And He will, one day, destroy them.

So what do you do when you watch that documentary? Or you realise the depth of Christian responsibility for the Holocaust? Or when the next appalling scandal hits ... as it will. You remember that the Church is not Jesus. You remember that we are in between. That the old world, and the old ways are still strong in us. But you do not lose hope, because you remember that at the heart of the Church, there is Jesus, in beauty and brilliance. And you know that that heart will one day burn through all the sin we pile on top of it. The Church will be holy, will be glorious, will sing with joy. Zebulun and Naphtali, and so much more, will be restored. But no thanks to us – thanks only to the one true light, who shines in the darkness and can never be put out. Thanks to Jesus, to whom be honour and glory and praise now and forever. Amen.

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