

Foxes and fisticuffs

I always think of this Sunday as one of “liturgical limbo” as we wait, poised between Ascension which we celebrated on Thursday and Pentecost which falls next Sunday, quite literally, following Jesus’ instructions to those first disciples immediately before he was taken up into heaven to “stay here in the city, until you have been clothed with power from on high”. Our Gospel reading today takes us back to the culmination of what’s known as his Farewell Discourse: his last words to his disciples before his arrest. This discourse ends in a prayer to God – a prayer for unity.

Cities and citizens seem have featured prominently in the last couple of weeks. The week before last a large party of us from St James’s joined with 6000 Londoners from all across the city at the Copper Box Arena for the mayoral assembly to see and hear how the two leading candidates Sadiq Khan and Zac Goldsmith would respond to the London Citizen’s manifesto, prioritising London’s housing crisis, the refugee situation, the Citizen’s Living Wage and opportunities for young people. Following Thursday’s election, we now have a new mayor, the son of a Pakistani immigrant bus driver, who amidst hashtags of “#YesWeKhan” has promised to work to make London better.

Over the same last few days we’ve struggled to comprehend the magnitude of the wildfire that has been sweeping across Alberta in Canada and devastating the city of Fort McMurray, voraciously consuming thousands of homes and businesses and leaving their charred remains in its wake. And we know all too well of the terrible ongoing violence in

the stricken cities such as Aleppo as we continue to pray for its people and all those fleeing Syria in search of safety.

Two friends and colleagues of mine – one from America and one from Canterbury - have both (separately) been spending time in the Holy Land, and updates of their trips have brought memories of our pilgrimage and our time there flooding back as I’ve seen images of Bethlehem, Nablus, Hebron and of course, the divided city of Jerusalem.

This for me was led to one of the most ironic juxtapositions in the light of this week’s Gospel. On the one hand there’s a terrific example of unity in the world of football. In one of the most memorable feel-good stories in the history of the sport, Leicester City (known as the Foxes) have beaten odds of 5000-1 to become champions of the Premier League. I don’t really follow football, but this is not so much a story of sport as one of spirit, and seeing the unanimous unbridled joy and celebrations sweeping across that city bringing together people of all ages and backgrounds and beyond has been infectious. It’s a classic British underdog story which has spread all around the world and it seems that even the teams they’ve beaten along the way cannot help but be glad for them.

In contrast I was particularly struck by this week by a photo taken in Jerusalem, showing the thankfully peaceful holy chaos of a candle lit vigil to celebrate Orthodox Easter in the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, which contains what is believed to be the site of Christ’s crucifixion and the tomb in which he was

buried. I say thankfully peaceful because this is a place where Jesus prayer for unity among his followers is far from being recognised. Different parts of the church are controlled by different Christian denominations with strictly regulated times and places for worship for Greek Orthodox, Armenian Apostolic, Roman Catholic, Coptic Orthodox, Ethiopian Orthodox and Syrian Orthodox. A “status quo” was established in 1853, with part of the agreement being that agreement the key to the church is kept and looked after by a local Muslim. It was hoped the “status quo” would stop sporadic outbreaks of hostility and violence, but alas no.

Some examples from recent years:

On a hot summer day in 2002, a Coptic monk moved his chair from its agreed spot into the shade. This was interpreted as a hostile move by the Ethiopians, and eleven were hospitalized after the resulting fracas.

In another incident in 2004, during Orthodox celebrations of the Exaltation of the Holy Cross, a door to the Franciscan chapel was left open. This was taken as a sign of disrespect by the Orthodox and a fistfight broke out. Some people were arrested, but no one was seriously injured.

On Palm Sunday, in April 2008, a brawl broke out when a Greek monk was ejected from the building by a rival faction. Police were called to the scene but were also attacked by the enraged brawlers. On Sunday, 9 November 2008, a clash erupted between Armenian and Greek monks during celebrations for the Feast of the Cross.¹

When I think I this I’m reminded of a prayer by Kate Compston:

¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Church_of_the_Holy_Sepulchre

Face to face we sit –
the silence, like a stone wall,
separating us.

It is not enough to sit in proximity
if we have not trust.

Give us hearts of flesh
to grieve our hostility:
then grant us laughter

and let us reach out.
Even if we do not see
eye to eye clearly

dare us to open up
our hands, be hospitable:
bare us, soul to soul.²

The unity for which Jesus prays is not just for those first disciples, but all those who will follow in their footsteps down through the ages up to and beyond the present day. It is a prayer for the Christian denominations in the Church of the Holy Sepulchre. It is a prayer for us. Take a moment to consider that, especially if you are someone who finds being prayed for difficult or uncomfortable.

This is not just a prayer, it is also a holy challenge, to dare to encounter those of whom we might feel inherently suspicious or wary. This applies perhaps as much if not more to other Christians than to those of other faiths. One of the best and yet most challenging things about the Anglican Communion is its breadth. Here within our own denomination, we don’t all agree on matters of liturgy, worship and scriptural interpretation. And yet, it’s a very important goal for us to explore, to journey beyond the reaches of our comfort zone. What is it that

² Kate Compston in Ward, H & Wilde, J (eds) 2003, *Resources for Preaching & Worship, Year C*, Louisville, Westminster John Knox, p. 168

we fear? Who are we less keen to be one with?

It's very easy to sit remotely and tut and criticise when we see or hear of holy fisticuffs elsewhere, but how open are we in approaching those with whom we won't naturally agree or feel at home?

We are a church that attracts a lot of labels – inclusive, progressive, liberal, radical. The word radical means going to the root or oracle. In Cambridge, where I did my theological training in a federation of Christian colleges of different denominations, we had a very helpful saying; "Roots down, walls down." In other words, if we are sufficiently rooted in our own tradition then we have nothing to fear from those of other traditions and can explore freely with apprehension or animosity.

As we make clear on our new strategic vision for the next few years, we are rooted here in the Eucharist, in the bread and wine in which we share each week. In this sacrament we step out of chronos and into Kairos, in the 'eternal now' in which we are united not only with Christ, but with the whole company of heaven, the saints and sinners who have gone before us, those we have loved and lost and those yet unborn.

Today we are particularly mindful of that unity and unbroken chain in advance of this afternoon's memorial service for Tom Cook, giving thanks that he was a familiar face in the circle around the altar for many, many years. And we give thanks for this unity as this morning we bless and bid a temporary farewell to two members of our community who are setting out on new adventures in life and faith. Sara Mark today begins her

pilgrimage walking the Camino to Santiago de Compostella and on to Finisterre and Julia Wickham is heading off to spend a year in the Democratic Republic of the Congo working for a development agency. We trust that both the sharing in this Eucharist and the prayers of blessing will be a lasting reminder to them that they are still a part of us and still have roots here, however far they travel. I know that assurance is one that is very special to other members of our community now elsewhere in the world – Russell in Cambodia, Elizabeth in the Philippines, Patti in Canada and Mark, Ruth, Lilian and Freddie in Holland, to name but a few.

Today is the feast day of Julian of Norwich, the mediaeval mystic and anchoress, who experienced a series of powerful visions as a young woman and spent the rest of her life reflecting on their meaning. In one of her most famous meditations, she wrote of how holding a hazelnut in the palm of her hand helped her understand the limitless everlasting love of God for all creation and every living thing. It also echoes this final prayer of Christ's that we may become one with God:

*In this little thing I saw three properties. The first is that God made it. The second that God loves it. And the third, that God keeps it. But what is this to me? Truly, the Creator, the Keeper, the Lover. For until I am substantially "oned" to him, I may never have full rest nor true bliss. That is to say, until I be so fastened to him that there is nothing that is made between my God and me."*³

When reflecting on Julian's life, on Christ's prayer that we might all be one and on our goal to engage more deeply with those of other traditions, I am reminded of F Belton

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<https://interruptingthesilence.com/2012/05/08/quotations-from-st-julian-of-norwich/>

Joyner Jr's observation: "Once again Jesus models the truth that the deepest moments of life are those when our hearts and habits are wide enough to include others."⁴

May it be so for us.

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the silence, like a stone wall,
separating us.

It is not enough to sit in proximity
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to grieve our hostility:
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bare us, soul to soul.

Amen.

⁴ Bartlett, David L; Barbara Brown Bartlett (2011-06-10). *Feasting on the Word: Year C, Volume 2, Lent through*

Eastertide (Kindle Locations 19275-19276). Westminster John Knox Press. Kindle Edition