

Isaiah 65:17-25; Luke 7:18-23

13.11.16

How the light gets in

Here we are today on this Remembrance Sunday when our thoughts turn to the subject of war and peace – and the things that make for war and the things that make for peace. We also gather today just five days after one of the most fractious and bitter elections in the history of the USA. And maybe you groan when I mention that because maybe you've heard quite enough about that election and hoped to come to church to get away from it all – to clear your mind and to focus on other things. Well, I don't think we can do that. Given that this is Remembrance Sunday, we cannot but at least consider the implications of this result for world we live in: what do learn about our world? What are the chances for a more or less peaceful world as a result of this election? And we would have had a responsibility to ask that question whoever won for, like it or not, what happens in the USA has major consequence for the rest of the world. For better or for worse, the most powerful nation on earth has influence over the whole planet and over all our lives.

We need to begin by considering some of the reasons for the Trump victory, what precipitated this huge shock – and here I have no unique insights and can only rehash what is being said over and over and over again by social commentators. It seems from what they are saying that our modern world is producing a growing number of people who feel alienated and estranged and dissatisfied and that the system does not work for them. There is a widespread sense of displacement and one major cause of this would seem to be what we call globalisation – the integration of markets and the free movement of trade and of ideas and information and of people. All this has resulted in the breakdown of old orders and old stabilities and left many feeling threatened and vulnerable. They no longer recognise the world they live in. They no longer feel at home. And of course it is those sorts of currents that no doubt partly explain Brexit, and it's those currents that Donald Trump has ridden and harnessed and his election represents a protest by those who feel aggrieved and bereaved and who feel that they are losing out. And of course when people feel this way they tend to look back to previous times when things were better. It's interesting to notice the language of this presidential campaign. Mr Trump's strapline has been, 'Making America Great Again' – suggesting that he can

bring back good times and make America once more what it once was in some mythical golden age. Again, we heard the slogan about ‘Taking America Back’ – as if recapturing something that has been stolen, something that has been snatched away.

In such times, when people feel aggrieved and threatened and insecure, there is at least a danger that they can be manipulated. That was the danger with the Brexit vote, that people on both sides could be manipulated by lies - as indeed they evidently were. And it can often lead to the scapegoating of one particular community as the cause of all evils, and certainly a hostility towards those who are different. That of course was also part of the story of Germany in the 1930s when many of the same ingredients were present. There too was a sense of alienation and a nursing of grievance. There too was a longing for past glories, and all that combined to make people open to manipulation and it led to the rise of Hitler and to the scapegoating of the Jews and eventually to the Second World War and the terrible destruction that we remember today.

Well, you could say that it is a similar story that lies behind our reading from the prophet Isaiah this morning. Here too there is a backdrop of insecurity and alienation. What has happened is that many Jewish people have returned to Jerusalem from exile in Babylon. Jerusalem had been overrun and destroyed by the Babylonians near the beginning of the 6th century BC, and the great temple there raised to the ground. And now the exiles had returned and they had been engaged in the task of rebuilding their shattered community. And they had earlier promises and prophesies to inspire and enthuse them, but somehow there was a feeling of disappointment and dejection. The temple had been rebuilt but it wasn't a patch on the old one and the country didn't feel like the great nation that had once been. And it seems that there was sectarian conflict within the community, and some of that conflict had racial overtones – nothing ever changes – and doubtless there was scapegoating and hostility towards some. And as with today there were the vulnerable for whom the system wasn't working. How interesting that the prophet promises a day when an infant will no longer live for a few days and where someone aged one hundred would seem like a youth, for it suggests that this was a time when there was high incidence of infant mortality and low life expectancy for the elderly. And how interesting that the prophet promises that people will build houses and live in them and plant vineyards and eat from them and that they shall not build and another inhabit. For that implies that this was a time when people were being

dispossessed of their homes and their livelihoods by the big businesses of the day, only where today it is steelyards and small businesses that are folding then it was vineyards and small businesses that were folding. This was a society where lambs were being devoured by wolves - and again, there's that sense of vulnerability and alienation, with people resentful that the system is not working for them. And they looked back to former times and dreamt of a golden age that never was.

What of course is significant is that in this situation the prophet looks not to the past but to the future. 'I am about to create new heavens and new earth', he says; 'the former things shall not be remembered...'. In other words do not look back to golden, former days. Forget the mythical past - and look forward to God's future. And there follows this exquisite passage with its vision of a society at peace. Here is security for all. Here human life is cherished. Here is work for all and it is a joy rather than a drudge as people enjoy the work of their hands.

So what are we to make of this passage? What can it say to us today? Is it just a dream? Well, bearing in mind that it was spoken to people who felt alienated and ill at ease and estranged from their home we start by saying that God's heart is with them, that God's compassion reaches out to them, that God hears their cries. The history of God's people, after all, begins with a community of slaves in Egypt, a community who were not at home in the land where they lived and who were working for the system rather than the system working for them. And we are told that God heard their cries and his heart went out to them - and God set them free. And this is a consistent theme in the Bible, that God is on the side of those who most alienated and least at home in the world, those who feel the cold shoulder of the system. It's what we find in our reading from Luke's Gospel this morning. John the Baptist is in prison and he is having second thoughts about Jesus. Maybe he's not the Messiah after all. Maybe his not the one they've been waiting for. We don't quite know what John expected of Jesus but it seems to have been judgement - hellfire and brimstone. And so his disciples come to Jesus to ask what is going on and Jesus tells them what is going on: that the blind are seeing and the deaf hearing and the lame leaping and the poor are hearing good news. And these were the alienated ones. These were the ones who because they were sick or because they were poor or because they were possessed or dispossessed had no stake in the world as it was. And Jesus scandalises the religious establishment of his

day by declaring that this is where God is to be found. This is how God's heart beats – not with judgement on sinners but with compassion for the alienated. And the church has always been at its best when it understands that and when it reaches out to those who for whatever reason are least at home and who feel most at odds with what has become 'normality'.

But there's more. The second thing this passage from Isaiah tells us is that the God who is disclosed here not only extends compassion to the alienated but is endlessly creative and inventive in bringing new life to deathly situations. Isaiah's vision is a reminder that God created the heavens and the earth out of chaos. And such a God can and will bring a new heaven and earth, a new world where there will no more be the sound of weeping. And that is a distant hope and it is far away on the horizon. But meanwhile God is on the side of change, and newness – new life – is possible.

Going back to the US election this week, the trouble with most elections is of course that too much is promised: 'yes we can!' 'Make America great again!' And we are either foolishly beguiled into believing such rhetoric or else we rightly grow cynical and despair of any change at all. Well, as Christians we are realists, but do not underestimate God's capacity to bring shoots of new life to desperate situations. Do not underestimate the transformative power of God's compassion. Do not underestimate the little ways in which hope breaks in, the little shafts of light that can split the darkness.

For some of us, at least, one truly sad event of the past week was the passing of the Canadian poet and singer Leonard Cohen. Cohen's songs spoke profoundly of alienation. They resonated with people who were going through the dark night, those for whom the world is a strange and foreign place. Yet his songs were always seasoned with dark humour and wit. One oft-quoted line of his is this: 'there is a crack in everything. That's how the light gets in.' And that is a word that resonates with our readings and our commemoration this Remembrance Sunday morning.

There was a crack in the Jerusalem of the post-exile years to which the Jews returned; there was a crack in the lives of the blind and the lame and the poor in Jesus' day; and there's a crack in today's globalised world – many cracks – that affects how people live and vote. And on this Remembrance Sunday we are only too aware of the crack of war and conflict. And you and I

– we come here today, broken people with cracks in our lives. There's a crack in everything. That's how the light gets in. Amen.