

2019-02-10 ... 6.30pm Evensong ... Mrs Jane Rylands

Hosea 1; Colossians 3: 1-22

I am discovering that there is a problem in coming up with a sermon when Paul is involved, although it is not certain that Paul is the author of Colossians. Paul is either crystal clear in his message and needs no further enlightenment, or his meaning is so convoluted that I'm too confused to disentangle him. Tonight's passage is of the crystal clear type – set your minds on things that are above, sort out your behaviour, let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, and treat one another respectfully because Christ is for all and in all.

In the beginning of the story of the prophet Hosea we have God at the end of his tether with the people of Israel ... and yet in the same breath as he's telling them that they are no longer his people, he is foretelling that things will change and everyone will again know that they belong to God.

My Jewish commentary of Hosea says that: 'punishment is presented as a kind of bridge that leads from one situation to another'.

Now, I do not see God as one who punishes. I see a God often totally frustrated with us but always leaving open a door of hope, to use an expression from a little further on in Hosea. I think the bad times, the times that might seem like punishment, probably often stem from within ourselves. When we feel bad with ourselves, we lose sight of God. We are filled with self-loathing and it is a struggle to turn this situation around and recognise God's forgiving love. It happens too when greed takes over as a prime motivator: the focus on God is lost, and instead of noticing the many good gifts of life and giving thanks for them, we blame God for the bad things which happen – those things which we have, of course, allowed to happen or maybe even made happen ourselves. And yet God is always waiting for us, offering his helping hand to lead us back to the Way.

Having read the bible passages for this evening, an episode in the book I have just finished reading leapt out. The book is **Catherine Fox's novel Acts and Omissions** which is the first book in the Lindchester Chronicles set around the fictional diocese of Lindchester – apparently situated between the dioceses of Chester and Lichfield although it doesn't really feel like it is set around here.

Paul is the Bishop, Martin is his Chaplain and Freddie May is a troubled young man, former chorister of the cathedral and currently being nurtured in one way or the other by the residents of the Cathedral Close.

Bishop Paul and Freddie May have fallen out and Paul has asked Martin to pray for Freddie. Unfortunately, Martin doesn't like Freddie and has had his own recent issues with him. He has found it almost impossible to pray for Freddie: ***'It's pointless. I'm sorry, Lord, I hate him. What can I pray, when I hate him so much'.***

Martin, having promised the Bishop to pray for Freddie, keeps on trying, and as he does, he realises that he has not behaved entirely well himself. But still, it is Freddie's 'manifold sins and wickedness' that consume him.

The story progresses with the voice of a narrator:

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'How is Martin faring? Is he still praying for Freddie May? He is! He began by firing vindictive little prayer arrows, only to find that they all rebounded. His poor conscience is now pin-cushioned like St Sebastian! He writhes and squirms, skewered upon the memory of that email he sent to the cathedral safeguarding officer. He's peppered by his own bullet points! Ah, deep down he knew at the time it was fuelled by spite and rage, though he would have died before admitting it. And then there was the last time he saw Freddie and turned him away when he was in such distress! Oh, the appalling damage he almost did there, the scandal he so nearly unleashed!

Every Eucharist is a torment. Jesus said, 'Before you offer your gift, go and be reconciled.' As sisters and brothers in God's family, we come together to ask our Father for forgiveness ...

Go and be reconciled, Martin. Go and be reconciled to your brother. Go. Go! But what's he meant to do? Email him? Phone him up? Drive to Barchester and find him? Oh, I can't. I just can't! He'll spit in my face, he'll ... he'll taunt me! Ask something else of me, Lord!

Oh Martin. What you have failed to realize is that Freddie is actually about as vindictive as a big bag of marshmallows. Go and find him, for goodness sake! I bet you will barely manage to blurt out the first sentence of your rehearsed apology before he falls on your neck and weeps for your misery. No? Very well. Then I fear you must wallow in that misery for a little longer.'

The value of rooting our lives in Jesus, of living with generous hearts towards our fellow man, of living lives of thanksgiving, is to ourselves, allowing us to live in the light of God, a light more lovely than any other. God did not want the people of Israel to fall apart as a nation because they had stopped recognising him; Paul did not want the Colossians to find themselves on the dark side of a self-built wall like Martin, wallowing in his misery.

I commend the wise words of the writer to the Colossians to you - set your minds on things that are above, sort out your behaviour, let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, and treat one another respectfully because Christ is for all and in all. Therein lies life as God intended life to be.