

2023-01-22 ... 6.30pm Evensong Sermon ... Mrs Jane Rylands

Ecclesiastes 3: 1-11; 1Peter1: 3-12

'Hope is the Thing with Feathers'

Emily Dickinson

"Hope" is the thing with feathers -

That perches in the soul -

And sings the tune without the words -

And never stops - at all -

And sweetest - in the Gale - is heard -

And sore must be the storm -

That could abash the little Bird

That kept so many warm -

I've heard it in the chillest land -

And on the strangest Sea -

Yet - never - in Extremity,

It asked a crumb - of me.

Having read a short biography of Emily Dickinson, I think she would have nodded her head at a lot that the 'Teacher' of Ecclesiastes expresses – a bemusement about the repeating patterns of life without ever seeming to get anywhere different, a noticing of and taking pleasure from some of the good things of life but an awareness of the futility of acquiring riches when you're going to die anyway especially when you don't know if those coming after you and inheriting them will be good or bad!

But mostly I would remark on this noticing of 'hope' within. Our translation of Ecclesiastes has sadly robbed us of the more poetic version of v 11 – that **God has placed 'eternity within our hearts'**.

Saint Peter, who may actually have been the author of the letter we know as 1 Peter, has a different view. He is totally confident in the 'living hope' that Jesus' resurrection from the dead has brought and of the perfect inheritance being kept safe in heaven for each believer. He prefaces the letter with greetings, **'May grace and peace be yours in abundance'** which reminds me of Jesus saying that he had come so the people might have life and have it in abundance. No begrudging view like that of the Teacher of Ecclesiastes who says one might as well take what pleasure one can out of the fruits of one's labour because there doesn't seem to be anything else one can do – God gave us these good things but who can really understand what God is up to!

For Peter, Jesus has enabled us to understand God.

Our two writers this evening both also have a view on the judgement of God.

A bit further on we can read in Ecclesiastes: **'Everything has already been decided. It was known long ago what each person would be. So there's no use arguing with God about your destiny.'**

Peter is writing to Christians who are living as foreigners in the lands which now make up Turkey. Having reminded them with great exuberance what is so amazing about God's promises to them, he then exhorts them not to give up when times seem a little tough. The letter goes on to give them instruction in how to be holy in all their conduct. He says: **'If you invoke as Father the one who judges all people impartially according to their deeds, live in reverent fear during the time of your exile.'**

I have just begun reading a book by James Jones who was the Anglican Bishop of Liverpool from 1998 – 2013. **PTO**

It's called **'Justice for Christ's Sake'**. As an erstwhile lawyer I'm always interested in what people have to say about 'justice' – are not we all ... we're not very old when we first utter the words 'it's not fair!'

His first involvement with the Hillsborough disaster which happened on the 15th April 1989 was when he was asked to preside at the tenth anniversary memorial service then held every year at Anfield. After the twentieth anniversary service at which 30,000 people were present the Government was persuaded to change their mind about commissioning an independent enquiry and Bishop James was asked to chair what was known as the Hillsborough Independent Panel. What an amazing piece of work that enquiry was with so many experts determined to hold firm in obtaining and telling the truth.

Margaret Aspinall was Chair of one of the three main campaigning groups, the Hillsborough Family Support Group. Her son was one of the victims. She said, **'We're told that everyone is equal in the eyes of the law. It's not true. We're equal only in the eyes of God. In the eyes of the law we are definitely not equal.'**

Bishop James was later asked by a later Government to prepare a second report describing lessons that needed to be learnt from the handling of Hillsborough. He called his report, **'The patronising disposition of unaccountable power'** and in it he sought to move the practice after a public tragedy towards a position where it could also be said that we are equal in the eyes of the law. He quotes Jesus, **'It behoves us not to overlook but to act upon the love and the justice of God'. (Luke 11:42)**

Prior to being Bishop of Liverpool James Jones was Bishop of Hull a city which has as a former MP William Wilberforce longtime a hero of the Bishop. He says, 'Although we live in a very different age, I have admired the example of Wilberforce and sought to embrace his brand of Christianity, which was characterized by personal spiritual renewal, through 'looking unto Jesus', and by the undoing of injustice through both charitable activity and legislative reform.'

This is an understanding of evangelicalism which I find easier to relate to than some of the more contemporary definitions and one I can take to heart and act upon – the divine imperative to make the world a better and fairer place.

Amen