

Sunday 27 August 2006: Eleventh Sunday after Trinity

Outer walls and inners struggles

Readings: Ephesians 6:10-20; John 6:56-69

“For our struggle is not against enemies of blood and flesh, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers of this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places.”

So Jesus asked the twelve, "Do you also wish to go away?"

Simon Peter answered him, "Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life. We have come to believe and know that you are the Holy One of God."

I spent some of my recent holiday walking in North Wales. The journey along the coast of the Llyn peninsula was something of a pilgrimage – following in the steps of the great Welsh saints of the 6th century like Beuno, Cadfan and Hywyn. The walk is a place and a time to take in the glorious and varied scenery, to breathe air that doesn't feel choked by city pollution, to sleep somewhere that's actually quiet and dark at night, to go all day and count the number of people you see on the fingers of one hand – or at least that's this particular city dweller's take on it. It's easy to be deceived by this rural idyll into forgetting the history of the area. Most of the 20,000 saints who are reputed to be buried on Bardsey island at the end of the peninsula fled there to escape the tribal warfare of the Roman and post-Roman times. During the walk we climbed Yr Eifl, to one of the most impressive iron-age forts in Europe, whose 4m high walls, 460m above sea-level testify to the threats, real or imagined, experienced by the estimated 500 or people who lived there. Near the foot of that mountain lies the valley of Gwrtheyrn, where local legends speak of it as the home of dragons, but also tell of the three curses laid on the valley by three priestly pilgrims en route to Bardsey whose attempted ministry was rejected by the locals. I have to say with all that cursing, being a priest in those days sounds much more fun than in the present!!

In such times of turbulence, it's easy to understand, how the words of the letters to the Ephesians might have resonated with those pilgrims:

“For our struggle is not against enemies of blood and flesh, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers of this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places.”

It's easy to see how they would have found encouragement and support in the language of being clothed in the armour of God, ready to do battle against the flaming arrows of the evil one.

It's easy to see how those of past centuries, without the benefit of our enlightened thinking, might have engaged with such language, but now, in the 21st century, what are we to make of “the cosmic powers of this present darkness” or the “spiritual forces of evil”? While occasionally, I may talk of the need to exorcise the office photocopier when it jams yet again, most of the time we assume that what the ancients call “powers” were merely little understood manifestations of material power: scientifically, through the laws of physical power; sociologically through institutionalised forms of corporate power; or psychologically through the power of the conscious or subconscious mind.

In his book “Naming the Powers”, the American theologian Walter Wink describes what he terms his pilgrimage away from the assurance that the cosmic powers and spiritual forces of the NT writers could be demythologised into such categories of power comprehensible to the modern mind. As his journey of reflecting on the use of such language with the NT progressed, Wink discovered that beyond the categories of power reducible to such physical structures, something else remained, “something invisible, immaterial, spiritual, and very, very real.” Such intangible powers, Wink argues are the outer and inner aspects of power – the spirituality of institutions as well as the tangible ways in which the power of such institutions is manifested through structures, systems, laws and individual offices. These visible and invisible aspects of power are intrinsically linked, they live or die together. But our experience of them as either physical or spiritual entities is fluid – and, Wink argues, we could understand the way such language is used in the NT if we grasped the fluidity of this relationship and were not so blinkered by our own materialistic understanding of the nature of power.

Wink’s arguments are backed up by rigorous and lengthy analysis of the Biblical texts – his “powers” series finally runs to 4 volumes – which I don’t intend to give a précis of here. But in re-reading some of Wink’s books recently, his language of journeying in his own understanding of power certainly struck a chord with my own experience.

Some years ago, a series of rather jolting personal experiences had left me feeling at a low ebb spiritually, and I remember turning to a wise and trusted friend. Her liberal theology credentials were impeccable, so I found myself shaken to the core when she began to describe my experiences in language which wouldn’t have seemed out of place with the dragons of Gwytheryn’s valley. “But,” my rational side argued, “I just don’t accept that as a way of understanding what’s going on”, while my battered spirit sobbed with relief at the shield of faithful prayer which my friend offered. Perhaps it says something about the largely unconscious journey of understanding that I’ve made since that when a friend at a similarly low ebb turned to me recently, I, too found myself responding in a way that echoed the language of myth, and the images we heard in the letter to the Ephesians.

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That recent conversation with a troubled friend, brought home for me something which I think I’d been trying to ignore – and that is I feel more aware of the reality of evil both within and without than at any stage in my life I can previously recall. I feel more aware of the experience of faith as something of a battleground with such powers than at any previous time in my life. To my surprise, I found myself looking at the passage from Ephesians set for today, and not deciding this be one of those Sundays when I ignore the scriptures and preach on the Collect, but actually feeling immensely grateful for the strength of the images it uses. In place of my usual repulsion at military metaphors, I’ve found myself strangely heartened by this description of a spiritual warfare waged with an enormous concentration of prayer and this counter-intuitive armour of truth, peace, righteousness and faith.

At a rational level, I don’t quite understand what that’s about. It may be something to do with the pervasive climate of suspicion, of violence and mistrust which seems to infect so much of our world, and which we seem to breathe in daily. It may be something to do with realising that the 4m high walls of the iron-age fort at Yr Eifl, built to keep out an unknown enemy are being replicated daily in our cities, airports and many other areas of our public life. It may be the images of conflict as a daily reality for so many. But I know also, it’s not just about the

society around me, and as much about the battles within to live out what I believe to be profoundly true but extraordinarily difficult to put into practice.

The Gospel reading today has echoes of that very struggle against the cosmic powers. Many have found the uncomfortable words of Jesus too much to bear and have turned away. And so Jesus confronts his disciples with the choice of facing that conflict within and without, or turning away from it. And in the words of Peter, I find the counterbalance to this increasing awareness of the reality of evil.

So Jesus asked the twelve, "Do you also wish to go away?"

Simon Peter answered him, "Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life. We have come to believe and know that you are the Holy One of God."

Peter's moment of recognition of the Holy One of God would find its ultimate expression in the resurrection of Jesus – after Jesus himself, clad with that same counter-intuitive armour of truth, righteousness and peace confronts directly the physical and spiritual reality of the powers that threaten to enslave humanity itself.

"Do you also wish to go away?" I can't help feeling that same question that faced the disciples, that has faced countless struggling pilgrims through the ages is the crucial one for us too. And whether or not you share my perception of that struggle, or that all too real awareness, perhaps the answer for us is the same too. Faced with the reality of evil within and without, faced with this struggle against the cosmic powers of this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places, to whom can we go?

You have the words of eternal life. We have come to believe and know that you are the Holy One of God."