

# Sunday 16 July 2006: The Fifth Sunday after Trinity

## The start of the day

**Readings: Ephesians 1: 3-14; Mark 6: 14-29**

*'Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, just as he chose us in Christ before the foundations of the world to be holy and blameless before him in love'.*

I wonder how your day normally begins? Early mornings are so often a race against the clock and, before we know it, the day is upon us and we're caught up in its activities without space to reflect.

But those verses strike me as a tremendous gift to give focus and direction and inspiration for all that may be to come. To remind ourselves, day by day, that God should be the major player on the stage of our lives and the initiator of the drama. In Christ, that drama was embodied and we are chosen to be a part of it. Day by day we are called to be 'holy and blameless' before God in love.

And what better time to be reminded of that – that which is both inspiring and daunting – than the early morning, before the day begins, by reading and contemplating on those verses. But the start of the day isn't an easy time for everyone. There are those who leap out of bed early with ease and energy but there are also those who find it harder – for various reasons – and those whose early mornings are dominated by meeting others needs. The morning is a time of such spiritual opportunity but the seemingly opposing forces can make this hard to realise.

Stanley Spencer, an artist who often explored the theme of resurrection, seemed to understand that. Many of his paintings depict figures – in a variety of guises – rising from the sleep of ages as if from a good night in bed. They're shown in village graveyards in his native Cookham or elsewhere. There are those who yawn, those who spring into vigorous action, those who remain half-awake/half-asleep in their graves. At times in those scenes one can also sense that some of the figures stirring are doing so with dismay. In one image, a small group of labourers with crowbars can be seen breaking open a series of graves as if to force the sleepers to get up in spite of themselves. Perhaps we might recognise ourselves somewhere among those figures.

St Benedict, whose feast day was on Tuesday, understood the difficulties some of us may have only too well. He knew that at least a proportion of his monks would sometimes succumb to what he describes as 'the excuses of the sleepy' and he suggests that the more energetic early risers among them should be encouraging to those who are more soporific or find it hard!

To find the space – both literal and in time – and the clearness of thought – to begin the day in quiet adoration and gratitude to God is a goal we may aspire to and reading those verses might be an inspiration towards it for some of us. For the morning moments can be a time for seeing things in new and different ways. Just as the day may begin with the brilliance of a cloudless sky or the murk of a grey and drizzly one.

The passage from Ephesians would encourage us to face the day with hope speaking, as it does, of holiness, love, timelessness and blessing. Of forgiveness, redemption, wisdom, and the riches of grace. There's a wonderful sense of the union of things earthly and heavenly and of our being caught up in that. And if we are, then it will change our day and that of those around us and those who may be affected by our actions or the decisions we take.

But we may be finding it difficult to face the day with hope. There are some enormous contrasts between the two readings this morning. That's not planned, because the Sunday lectionary readings are principally taken from Mark this year and, although we don't get the whole gospel, what we do get is in more or less chronological order. So it is perhaps serendipitous that we have such a joyful epistle and such a dark gospel reading – full of fear and evil.

We came straight into the middle of the gospel story. 'King Herod heard of it for Jesus' name had become known'. What Herod had heard about was that Jesus had been ordering his disciples to go out and anoint and heal and call people to repentance. And Herod was worried. Perhaps he felt threatened. Faith has the capacity to do that to us – especially other people's faith.

And Herod was fearful of John. Fear in the Bible is a much richer word than it is now. I suppose we could say there's a secular type of fear – being frightened, being afraid of whatever it may be and a holy fear – a sacred fear – when we are in awe of 'otherness', of God – there may well be something of the secular nature of fear in that but there's also something mystical and remarkable as we're taken beyond ourselves. Perhaps Herod was experiencing something of that dichotomy for, when Herodias wanted to kill John – who'd been speaking the truth which she hadn't wanted to hear – she couldn't because 'Herod feared John knowing that he was a righteous and holy man, and he protected him'. There is a sense of real, gut-churning fear here but also something of awe, even if it may contain an element of self-interest.

So what if we may have begun this day, or some other day, not with hope but with fear? 'Even though I walk through the darkest valley I will fear no evil for you are with me' we recall from the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm. The Jewish philosopher, Martin Buber, once tried to explain the difference between theology and religion by saying that theology was talking about God while religion was experiencing God. He suggested that the difference between them was similar to the difference between reading a menu and eating a meal. Theology can instruct and help us to understand but only actual contact with God can nourish and sustain us. Sometimes the Bible talks of God as 'He' – talking about God and sometimes as 'You' – experiencing and encountering God. 'I will fear no evil for you are with me.'

Evil seems to pile in on us day by day. This week bombs in Mumbai, killings in Baghdad, the events of the last few days in Israel and Lebanon, but also evils perpetrated by one individual against another. Tragically, next week we can be pretty certain that more evil will be done and that there will be more people living with fear.

It's not real or believable Christianity to say that there is no such thing as evil. That way lies a world of make believe. And the psalmist doesn't say that he will fear no evil because there is none or that everything – even the most terrible act – is part of God's plan all to ultimately work out for the best. Nor does he say that he will fear no evil because he's a good person and evil only happens to those who deserve it. What he acknowledges is that there is evil in the world and that he is as vulnerable to it as anyone else but that he doesn't fear it because God is real and God is with him.

Recently there's been a rather beautiful installation in St Paul's Cathedral by Yoko Ono. It was a group of 100 ropes streaming down from the North Transept and merging into a riverbed of rocks. It was an interactive piece, people looking at it being free to take one of the rocks and place it on one of two mounds before the altar – the mound of sorrow or the mound of joy – of fear or of hope. Yoko Ono, who comes from a Buddhist/Christian background was reflecting on the time when she and John Lennon had planted two acorn seeds at an art exhibition at Coventry Cathedral. One seed faced east and one seed faced west symbolising the growing together of people through art. Two weeks later the seeds were stolen. And she said 'Violent thoughts are trying to destroy the world but we mustn't close up with fear. We must open our hearts and cover the world with love.'

The promise to us isn't that we'll be spared fear or evil – like the vegetarian who, because of his way of life, expects not to be charged by the bull (and I say that as a vegetarian!) but that when we face pain or evil, in distant places or on our own doorsteps, then we face it not alone but with God. Why else the Gospel story and the events of Holy Week and Easter? Why else Christ on the cross and Christ risen for us that makes possible those wonderful words of hope with which we might want to think about beginning our days

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