

Sunday 15 March 2009: Third Sunday of Lent

Behold the blessed light

Readings: Exodus 20.1-17; John 2.13-22

“Destroy this temple and in three days I will raise it up.” Well, as far as I know this was not exactly the brief that the Vicar gave to our builders as he signed the contract for the renewal of St Martin’s. And what’s more, the three days felt more like five years to me!

Destroy...rebuild...Good themes as we reflect in our Lent sermons on the theme of what it has meant for us as a faith community, when we left our familiar dusty old place here two years ago and returned to discover a renewed building, with renewed light and renewed possibilities.

I have always been particularly drawn to the passage of John’s gospel which we heard today. All thoughts about gentle Jesus, meek and mild, the little Lord Jesus no crying he makes, are now gone; any lingering sentimentality about Christmas is ruthlessly swept away. Now Jesus really has grown up.

In my mind’s eye I think of the temple courtyard as a lively Eastern market place, perhaps a little like the square Djamaa El Fna in Marrakech. Jesus comes into the square with his followers and is confronted by a scene that really gets to him. Making a whip of cords he drives all of them out of the temple, he pours out the coins of the moneychangers and overturns their tables. Now this Jesus is a man I *can* relate to. Someone who loses his temper and even occasionally throws things!

We don’t know how many times Jesus would have visited the temple. We do know he was there as a babe in arms.(probably crying I have to say). We know that he was there twelve years later as a youth but now, days before his death, he *knows* what his mission is to be and that the old order is to be turned upside down just like the tables of the money changers. Jesus is disturbed by what he sees as he enters the courtyard; his feelings turn to anger, and his anger turns to action and his actions are very disturbing.

It all feels scary. We tend to shy away from strong feelings, anxious that they have a power of their own which threatens to overwhelm us. And yet the challenge that Jesus gives today is very disturbing. When Jesus talks of the temple being destroyed, he is talking about the temple of his body, and we are immediately taken to his passion, death and resurrection. A path which he is now called to follow relentlessly. And which we follow as we move ever closer to Holy Week and Easter.

The words of John’s gospel, dark and brooding, pregnant with meaning as always, give the strongest hint of this at the beginning of today’s reading with the words: ‘The Passover of the Jews was near and Jesus went up to Jerusalem’. Of course we know the end of the story. We know that Jesus turned his anger into action. We also know that his action was the ultimate gift of generosity, as he gave himself up to humiliation, torture, and execution. The destroying of the temple of Jesus’s body, led miraculously to that most precious gift which humankind has ever received; the gift of love from God beyond our wildest imaginings.

The same could be said about the renewal of these buildings. Some of what we had has been destroyed; that was an inevitable part of making the journey. What has been rebuilt is more

that I could have imagined. It is a sign of the immense generosity of God to us. How we now use this gift, here in this renewed place is our new responsibility and joy. The journey that we made by leaving and then coming back has, I believe, given us a new sense of who we are as a community of faith. We come into a place where God's light is harvested, both physically and symbolically. It is a place which will, if we allow ourselves to feel our full humanity and emotion, as Jesus did in the temple, become a place where, in a phrase often used by Archbishop Robert Runcie, we do indeed have a window onto heaven.

When I come into all our renewed spaces I am always struck afresh by the quality of the light. Again and again I find the same passage of mediaeval writing comes into my mind. *Ecce Beatam Lucem.*

*“Behold the blessed light, behold eternal goodness.
Benign power and majesty are seen everywhere.
The dazzling splendour of the sun is matched by you,
the moon, and by the stars shining brightly in their great glory.
O how such eternal nourishment feeds holy minds!
Mercy and love are here, and always have been;
here is the eternal fount of life.
O blessed place!
This delight, this peace, this goal, this mark draws us from here straight to Paradise.”*

There is a wonderful story about the religious man who heard that a flood was coming which would sweep away both him and the village downstream. When he heard about it he got down on his knees and started praying. Surely with his strong faith, God would prevent the flood. After a few minutes a man came by in a rowing boat. The man said: “Get into my boat and we will go down and rescue the villagers”. But the man said: “No no, I am a religious man and I am praying to God about it.” The boat floated on downstream in the rising water and the religious man went back to his prayers. A few minutes later a helicopter flew down to him, a rope was lowered and the man in the helicopter said: “Quick get in and you can escape the flood and we can go and save the villagers. “No, no, I am a religious man and I am praying to God about it. Everything will be fine.” The man in the helicopter pleaded with him to get in but he said no and the helicopter flew off. The religious man went back to his prayers. Eventually the flood comes and he is swept away and drowned. As he approaches St Peter at the gates of heaven the religious man says “ I want to see God, I've got a bone to pick with him. He never answered my prayers.” As the religious man is ushered into the presence of the Almighty, God says: “What are you doing here I sent you first a warning about the flood, then a rowing boat and then a helicopter. What *are* you doing here!!”

A similar conversation between us and God might begin with God saying: “I sent you a visionary priest, many gifted leaders, I sent you 38 million pounds, I sent you a building which harvests my light and I sent you a window onto heaven...now how did you use those gifts.”

I offer some suggestions about how we might prepare for that conversation:

Firstly, I think we need to acknowledge that the journey has been hard and long, that the burden has fallen on all of us and some have carried much more than an equal share. There has been a cost to that. Some people for all sorts of reasons have been lost along the way. We need to hold them in our prayers and give thanks to God for their gifts and insights. New people have of course joined us as we travelled and more noticeably since we returned. You are welcome and you are already enriching the life of this place.

Secondly, we need to give thanks for the experience of the journey and for our return.

Finally, having learnt from our experiences these last few years, treasuring and pondering all these good and difficult things in our hearts, we need to begin to leave the past behind and befriend our new spaces.

The time is soon when we need to be able to walk in here and simply say: “Ecce beatam lucem; behold the blessed light.”

I often come into church late on a Wednesday afternoon as I prepare to take the 6pm communion service. It is the end of the day and I have a profound awareness of all the people who have walked in here during the day:

The sad and the joyful, the lonely and the lovers, the homeless and the rich, the perplexed and the enquiring.

Some come to weep, some to give thanks, some to stand and stare... all have been drawn in by something. In the Eucharist that evening we hold all those people before God in prayer. That is what this place is for and all that follows from that is being revealed in God’s good time.

St Martin’s is a place which, because of its setting and the people who we encounter here, disturbs us and feeds us. I am sure that we have all had our share of difficulties in our encounters with people and in our encounters with God in this place as well as our moments of joy and delight. And it is because of that mixed experience, not in spite of it, that this place is indeed a place of blessed light and eternal goodness.

*“Here too is eternal nourishment which feeds holy minds!
Mercy and love are here, and always have been; here is the eternal fount of life.
O blessed place!
This delight, this peace, draw us from here straight to Paradise.”*

In this place God invites us to follow Jesus’s example... to be moved by what we encounter, to be moved by who we encounter and to turn that emotion into action. To build with him a new temple to the service of all the expressions of humankind who walk through any of our many doors and let them see for themselves a window onto heaven.

Ecce Beatam Lucem. Behold the blessed light.

Amen.