

Hymns: **148** “Come, let us with our Lord arise”
 160 “Powerful in making us wise to salvation”
 342 “‘All hail the power of Jesu’s name”
 693 “Beauty for brokenness”

Readings: **James 3:1-12**
 Mark 8:31-38

“HE SAID THIS OPENLY”

Our screens have been dominated for yet another week by pictures that are almost too unbearable to look at. They’ve shown the flight of peoples from the war zones of Syria, the chaos of Libya, the police state of Eritrea and the brutalities of Afghanistan. We can’t just pretend it’s not happening? I’ve lived a life that’s long enough to have seen some of the worst things that human beings can do to each other. I’ve lived through revolutions and earthquakes, I’ve seen people in refugee camps and detention centres, I’ve met wicked people in government and have shaken the hands of a dictator. But now, far from being inured to all these sights and situations, I’ve felt a despair and (sometimes) downright anger at what’s happening in our world. As I look at the pictures, as I hear the politicians speak, I’ve tried to imagine the plight of those men and women, boys and girls, and babies too who are on the move. Can I imagine that they are the embodiment of the wicked words, the accusatory pointed finger, the dismissive description which I have so often listened to. These people are people. They are not swarms, marauders or (for statistical purposes) just “immigrants”. They are human beings and their plight, but for the grace of God, could so easily be ours. Indeed, in the early years of the 20th century, my coal-mining grandfather had to make a similar decision himself. The bottom had fallen out of the market for coal and thousands of his fellow-workers were being reduced to grinding poverty. So he took the radical decision to leave the valleys of south east Wales in search of a living further west. A cousin had settled in Burry Port and they headed towards him. They had no prospects of a home or a job or a means of finding a living. But they moved because they couldn’t survive any longer. So my grandfather and his wife, together with their four daughters, took a 100 mile journey into an unknown future. Compared with that, of course, the plight of those seeking similar comfort today is so much vaster and uglier. But there are many people in this congregation today who, a generation or so ago, could point to similar decisions being made by their forbears.

My anger turned to tears on Thursday when I saw officials throwing food packets to a desperate crowd pushing up against a barrier. I’d only ever seen anything like that previously at London Zoo when I watched the keepers throwing fish to the seals. What have we come to? Why can’t we see what we’re doing?

When our Synod yesterday decided to join the demonstration that had been organised and which was wending its way from the Mall down Whitehall into Parliament Square, my heart leapt for joy. Synod doesn’t usually do that to me! But

the thought of walking in solidarity with others who were demanding that governments put more heart, more imagination, more fellow-feeling into their treatment of refugees just filled me with delight. We shouted our slogans, we rallied round our banners, we sang a song or two as we moved slowly down Whitehall. I was close to a group of Eritreans drawing attention to their plight. I kept the company of a ministerial colleague from the Congo, a delightful man who escaped from persecution there just eight years ago. There were young women in hijabs making their contribution to the cause. It was all uplifting and I had a clearly focussed sense of purpose.

Then came the crossover moment: our procession was joined (or was it infiltrated?) by those who'd been celebrating the victory of a new leader of the Labour Party. They came from the nearby Queen Elizabeth Hall and soon became the dominating force within the mass of people. Their triumphal narrative soon forced our campaigning narrative into subjection. I saw the Eritreans lose heart, my Congolese colleague feeling marginalised, the hijab-wearing young women dropping away. Suddenly we were no longer a body of people appealing for justice and generosity for people on the move. We were a crowd baying for political change, chanting revolutionary slogans, raising the red flag. And the new leader himself, despite a few perfunctory words about refugees and asylum-seekers, turned the occasion into an acceptance speech, a victory speech, for his success in becoming leader of his Party.

I couldn't believe it.

But I got all the evidence I needed that the writer of the letter of James, the passage we heard Ken Pippin read a few moments ago, had got things spot on in his descriptions of the way the tongue works. It's like, he said:

- the bit in the mouth of a horse that can turn a powerful animal at will;
- or the rudder of a large ship which can change its course despite its tiny size in comparison with the mass of the vessel;
- a tiny spark, insignificant at first, but which can set a forest on fire.

The tongue can hurt, destroy, humiliate, poison. But it can also build up, encourage, inspire. I experienced both of these yesterday.

Don't suppose for a moment that this is a phenomenon which belongs in the open air, to be found in the world of politics, to be experienced "anywhere-but-here". The Church has always been a breeding ground for the tongue's work. Church activity places the speaking of the word at the very centre of its activity. Christians do, after all, proclaim their belief in "the Word made flesh". Our speaking can achieve two quite distinct ends. It can provide edification, instruction, exhortation, uplift, guidance. But it can also be lecturing, hectoring, controlling. And, softer stuff this, it can manifest itself in rumour-mongering and gossip.

"Watch your tongue!" is a salutary warning to church-goers and has been since the days of the Bible. It was hypocrisy, speaking with a forked tongue, people saying one thing but doing or meaning another, that got under Jesus's skin. Nothing made

him angrier than that. Words can be slippery. What we say, unwittingly or intentionally, can go viral. We should be careful.

“Anyone who makes no mistakes in speaking can keep the whole body in check.” Thus spake the writer of the Epistle to James. However, he goes on, “we all make mistakes, many mistakes, in what we say.” And those of us in leadership must measure our speech, recognise the dangers that might emanate from what we say, apologise for our mistakes, appeal to all people when speaking to all people. The work we do through the speaking of the word, through rhetoric and oratory, carries so many possibilities for error and hurt.

But this should not allow us to descend into paranoia.

We should never retreat from the need to be transparent.

Jesus, at the height of his popularity, when he was “on a role”, made sure he was not deluding his followers about the consequences for them of following him along his chosen road.

To indicate just how popular he was, let’s remind ourselves that he was being compared with the hip John the Baptist, a superstar in his own right; with the charismatic prophet Elijah, the quintessential spokesperson for God in the Old Testament; and even with the figure who represented the ultimate fulfilment of all their dreams and hopes – the Messiah. Someone who can stand comparison with all of those must be in a league all of his own. You couldn’t get higher than that. He would have been top of the pops, a man for all seasons.

But none of their applause turned his head. Even as they rhapsodised, he insisted on total transparency. He spelled out exactly where the road he was on would lead to. He pointed out that there are no shortcuts to Nirvana, Valhalla, Paradise or the Kingdom of Heaven. And even if there were such a destination, the road would go through suffering and humiliation, rejection and darkness before getting to its final point. It was going to be a rough road where death itself would lurk.

He said all this openly. The truth must out. He hid nothing from them. There was no room for delusion or denial or dissimulation.

So, having recognised how difficult it can be to say what we have to say, we (his present-day followers) must not hide behind those difficulties or lose courage. We must say what’s in our hearts and say it openly, transparently, accessibly.

Back to yesterday’s demonstration.

The new political leader was greeted in messianic terms. “A new era in politics” they were saying. The supporters who were there in droves all thought that they were on the road to the New Jerusalem, the one described in the book of Revelation, the one where there are no tears, where there is no death, where there will be no mourning or crying or pain, where all things will be made new. JC (that’s what they call him, that’s what his initials are) is going to take them there. They were pretty sure of that.

JC, our JC, was clear. His road would lead to Jerusalem too. The old Jerusalem. And it would be a *via dolorosa*, a painful road. And those who would come with him should expect tears and death, mourning, crying and pain. But these would be the birth pangs of a new order. Followers should be ready to deny themselves and take up their cross. If not, said Jesus, then let such a person tell me “what if profits him to gain or imagine that he gains the whole world, if it’s at the cost of his true self. What can he give to buy that self back again?” And the answer to that harrowing question is, of course: “nothing”.

In recent weeks I’ve preached three sermons, and they might have been four. They were on familiar texts or parts of a familiar text:

- Love God with all your heart;
- Love God with all your mind;
- Love God with all your soul;
- (this might have been my fourth if there had been time) Love God with all your strength.

After preparing this week’s sermon I’ve decided that I could put a fifth sermon in direct succession to the other four. It would be entitled:

- Love God with all your tongue.

Speak openly. Be transparent. Speak the truth in love. Don’t be afraid of attempting the task of explaining our values to others. Stand up for those values. And God help you.

Amen