

Hymns: 3 “Eternal God, your love’s tremendous glory”
 520 “Give to me Lord, a thankful heart”
 526 “Lord of all hopefulness, Lord of all joy”
 94 “To God be the glory, great things he has done”

Readings: Acts 16:9-15
 John 14:23b-29

“NOT AS THE WORLD GIVES”

Here’s an insight into a typical ministerial Sunday.

First, of course, there’s this act of worship to prepare. We’re generally up early giving thought and attention to all that must appear to happen seamlessly. And now, here we are, enjoying our fellowship together. When it’s done, there’ll be clearing up, cheering up, catching up; we’ll deal with a number of questions and requests; we’ll hang around “just in case”. Finally, there’ll be the locking of doors and the going home.

We’ll get a bite to eat and, with a bit of luck, we’ll watch Manchester United playing Leicester City. Then Jennifer and I will dash to catch the 5.05pm train to Hatfield.

Why Hatfield?

Because we’ve been daft enough to say “Yes” again to an invitation to which we should have said “No”. Someone thought Jennifer and I were just the people to spell out the arguments for and against remaining in the EU. Can you believe it?

So, in readiness for this evening, I’ve been reading *stuff!* So too has Jennifer; but she’s also been surfing the Net. Our heads are bulging with facts and figures, figuring out and factoring in. Now we need someone to spell out the arguments to us! It could be you!

With all this in mind, just imagine what fizzy chemistry has been let loose in my head by the passage from the Acts of the Apostles which you heard read, the passage set for this Sunday, which is all about St Paul’s decision to enter Europe and bring the gospel to our continent. In? Or Out? – In, he decided. No Brexit for him. And he/we have never looked back.

The first thing to notice in this passage is the way Paul headed for Philippi – a Roman garrison city. He was himself a Roman citizen; he had the equivalent of “Schengen status” – he could travel anywhere in the Roman Empire, cross borders, claim rights, enjoy protection. This was done long before NATO, the European Convention on Human Rights, the International Court of Justice, had been thought about. Paul headed for the Roman city and stayed there until he was sure of his bearings.

The second item of interest is that Paul and his companions came into Macedonia in a small boat crossing the very same stretch of water as so many refugees in our time cross as they flee from Syria, through Turkey, to what they perceive as safety, well-being, a future in Europe. The gospel was brought to Europe by a migrant evangelist who knew that his message was too big for one person, one ethnic group, one country, one continent. So he set sail in his tiny boat with his huge message to share. He travelled on uncharted waters (at least metaphorically), convinced that this was something he simply had to do.

And then there's the curious matter of the third person. No, not an elephant in the room. A point of grammar. We're told in this passage that they went through Phrygia, down to Troas, from town to town; and that he has a vision, wanted Timothy to accompany him, chose Silas. All very clearly the third person (singular and plural). But, in the middle of a sentence, he/they change to we. Just listen: "When he has seen the vision, we immediately tried to cross to Macedonia." The conjecture is that Paul has been joined by Luke who henceforth writes up the account of Paul's travels as a companion. Henceforth, Paul will no longer be alone nor will he be lacking for secretarial (or) medical skills. All ventures into new territory are better done with friends and followers. It's a pity, in these days, that "friends" and "followers" are thought of as virtual rather than actual. In Paul's case, they were actual friends and followers. I hope that category of friendship and fellowship will never disappear from the face of the earth.

This remarkable passage then throws up another tidbit. When Paul and his friend eventually leave the city to explore the outside world, they come across Lydia, a woman "who worshipped God". It's good to remember that God does not only exist within our own minds or our own experience. This woman, who'd never come within hearing of the Christian gospel, worshipped God. Out there in the world around us, we should not be surprised at the number of people who never darken the doors of a church or religious community but who still have an active sense of the presence of God in their lives. As for Lydia, she originated in Turkey, in a small town named Thyatira but clearly had a home on this side of the water too. She became the first European convert to Christianity. All the fuss about women priests and women bishops that have beset the Christian Church down the ages – yet here we have the gospel itself rooted into European soil for the very first time by a woman.

The final thing to point out from this passage occurs just outside the verses which were read this morning. The second recorded expedition of Paul to Philippi wasn't the success of the first. Paul brought a slave girl to conversion but, in doing so, he negated her abilities as a fortune teller. Her gift at telling fortunes brought in ready cash for her owners. So they, naturally, were pretty fed up at Paul's success. Their livelihoods were threatened by the loss of this income stream. So they had Paul and his pals brought before the magistrates; they whipped up some crowd hysteria; the prisoners were stripped naked, beaten with rods, flogged severely with whips, thrown into jail, fettered in irons and put into solitary confinement.

And the charge laid against them?

That they were Jews. That they were disturbing the Pax Romana, the Roman Peace.

Yes, even then. As the Jewish diaspora moved outwards after the destruction of Jerusalem in the year AD70, so resentment at their presence grew in the towns and cities around the Mediterranean. They didn't want immigrants. They were fed up with the prospect of having to cope with them.

Anti-Semitism. Some very stupid things have been said, old anxieties have been reignited, a passionate debate is taking place. I've seen so many column inches devoted to the distinction we must make between anti-Zionism and anti-Semitism. It's a messy business. But let's be clear. Attacks on Jews as Jews must simply be fought against. The State of Israel exists, it will not be dis-invented, it has the right to exist and its people have the right to live in security. Anti-Semitism (as well as Islamaphobia and all other kinds of racism) must be combatted and with energy. There can be no ambiguity on these points.

With all that said, however, there remains plenty of scope to press for a resumption of the peace process, to advocate a two state solution to the Israel/Palestine problem., to express distaste for the fences and walls that are built to separate the two peoples, to be critical of a Jewish member of the House of Lords accused of child abuse.

What a lot of thinking we must do as a result of our reading this morning. The verses from the Acts of the Apostles have morphed with what Jennifer and I have been doing to prepare ourselves for this evening's Hertfordshire encounter. But let me end with a story – a story I told on Radio a couple of days ago.

The Olympic torch is on the move. A few days ago, it was carried on its way by a man named Ibrahim Al-Hussein. This man is an athlete, a swimmer, taught by his dad in a little town named Dier-ez-Zor on the river Euphrates in Iraq. He's 27 years old and few people illustrate the plight of so many people in our present-day world better than he. He lost a leg to a bomb four years ago and fled from his home town to Turkey. Later, he crossed to the Greek island of Samos where he's lived for the last two years. He's carrying the Olympic flame through a refugee camp and, with half a dozen other refugees, will represent Greece in Rio as the teams march into the stadium behind the Olympic flag. The outsiders have been brought in, welcomed to their new homeland; they are no longer strangers. Indeed, they have been asked to represent their new country.

That's what I said on Friday. I had wanted to add two or three lines to those words. But I was forbidden. So here, for the first time, are the words that were banned.

"In asking Ibrahim Al-Hussein, disabled and a refugee, to carry the Olympic torch; in giving a stateless man citizenship in his new country; the Greek government have done something beautiful not only for one individual but for all of us. Yes, for all of us and for God too. An outsider has been brought into the midst, a stranger has been befriended, a man who was lost is found, and all the bells in heaven have rung for joy.

Why were these words disallowed? Because, I was told, "there is a subtext which any listener could not possibly miss – namely that we should be inviting more

refugees into our own communities. It breaks the referendum campaign guidelines because it is comparing by default what is happening in Greece with what is not happening in our own communities.”

My producers were only doing their job. Bless `em. But we have no such constraints here and I'm glad now to share those ideas with you.

A beautiful thing is a beautiful thing is a beautiful thing and we can (must) say so. For this is something that the world knows little about. But then, it's not as the world gives, but God gives. We should be grateful.

Amen