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Hymns:     11     “Holy, holy, holy, Lord God Almighty!”  
          673    “Will you come and follow me”  
          350    “I cannot tell why he, whom angels worship”

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Readings:  Psalm 16  
              Luke 9:51-62

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### **“DON’T LOOK BACK”**

*This week’s sermon was preached two days after the Referendum that decided the future of the relationships between the UK and the European Union. Everyone was reeling from the outcome of that Referendum. In church, we had an extraordinary mixture of elements – a group of 240 young people from Illinois (with a choir of 55), another group from Beijing with a choir of 18, a baptism party, an 80<sup>th</sup> birthday, a farewell moment for our Korean intern and so much else. So the mood was complex – ebullience at the bustling nature of those gathered for worship, and, at the same time, downright shock (bordering on trauma) on the part of large swathes of the congregation. It was in anticipation of all these factors that I prepared my sermon.*

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That Was The Week That Was.

What a week! I’m reeling from it. I’m almost punch drunk.

Where to begin. My head is all over the shop. I hope I can bring something coherent to this morning’s worship.

Even Adele at Glastonbury last night had to comment: “It’s a bit weird, all the stuff that’s going on at the moment,” she said, before adding, “so we all need to look after each other.”

Europe has been centre-stage. We’ve had England, Wales and Northern Ireland doing their damndest to win the European Cup on the football field. Europe is their only focus. At the same time, other swathes of the population of those same countries have shown their loathing of Europe by voting to leave the European Union. Curiously, Scotland didn’t get to the football tournament but it voted massively to stay in the European political arena. The UK is bitterly divided, nonplussed, all at sea. None of us knows what’s hit us, where we’re going, how things will turn out.

I’m a preacher. And a preacher has to preach. So let me try.

Like the disciples of Jesus who, faced with people who said NO to their plans to stop off and visit their town, I wanted to begin this sermon by pouring fire and brimstone on those who’ve got us into this mess. I wanted them to be consumed in the flames!

But just as Jesus shrugged his shoulders and moved onto safer ground, to another community, I recognised that I ought to try to do the same.

The word “referendum” means “something we must look back at”; “something we need to look at again”; “something done that we might want to undo.”

The lectionary this morning tempts me to coin another word. I’d prefer to talk about a “futurendum”, which might mean “a way forward we need to identify”; “a direction of travel that might bring us to our senses”, “open up a new horizon, deal with our lostness.”

Looking forward, if we can manage to do that, would take its lead from the determination shown by Jesus in this morning’s gospel passage where he sets his face, sets his face like a flint, towards Jerusalem. In doing so (and he knows this very well) he embraces the idea of the need for suffering love. He seeks to show that he has no desire to be a tyrant, a despot, a powerful ruler backed by the apparatus of the state or the force of arms. His rule will be a moral rule. He’ll set an example. He’ll show that love can win people’s hearts more effectively than dictats or guns or even the outcome of a referendum.

It you want to go with his programme, you’d better work it all out – your priorities are going to have to change. There’s lots you’re going to have to give up. The new road you’re travelling may cause misunderstanding and even opprobrium among those you live and work with. You too must set your face like a flint towards the new Jerusalem, today’s Jerusalem, with a vision of the world where tears are wiped away, hope rekindled in the human breast and peace with justice flows down like rivers to the sea.

Now that’s a sermon I could preach quite easily and, prior to last Thursday, I could have done so without too much difficulty. This week, however, I feel the need to dig more deeply, and to resist the feeling that I must force my words out through gritted teeth.

Why?

Because I’ve seen how deeply embedded a lust for power can be, how it can infect leaders and lull people, manipulate them, so that perspective, common sense, and good judgement are abandoned.

Our visitors from Illinois might be interested to know that we have a window commemorating the ministry of Bishop Matthew Simpson. We’re very proud of his links with the Chapel (where he chaired the first meetings of the World Methodist Council in 1881). Simpson was a close friend of Abraham Lincoln. It was he who said prayers in the White House after the assassination had taken place. And he accompanied Lincoln’s body back to Springfield in Illinois where he preached the sermon at the President’s graveside. Among the things he said are these words:

*There are moments which involve in themselves eternities.... such a moment came in the tide of time to our land when a question (the*

*question of slavery) must be settled.... the contest was for human freedom. Not for this Republic merely.... but to decide whether the people.... not tyrants, or aristocrats, or class rule.... were destined to enjoy good government. This is the great question for which we have been fighting.*

Good government – aha! That’s what we need now.

They called him “honest Abe.” He was accessible, humble, “ordinary”, a man of the people. O for such leaders now!

We’ve come through a campaign where those on public platforms and in front of cameras and microphones have given us blatant lies. Why can’t politicians speak the plain truth? Already, a number of claims made on the campaign trail, are being talked down. We’ve been told lies about the £350 million per week that can now be pumped into the NHS. Lies about the millions of Turks ganging up on the borders of Europe waiting to flood into our country. Lies about the state of our economy. Lies about future of our parliament. Why do we have to endure such leadership? Are we all fools?

How can communities that have received their infrastructure, schools, roads, hospitals, industrial parks and more vote massively against Europe? “What has Brussels ever done for us?” Words spoken by people who without Brussels, would be living in desolate communities with nothing to take them forward.

How can journalists be returned to their jobs as reporters, interpreters, communicators of the complex issues facing our world? I’ve read so many column inches attacking the House of Lords because it is (so the claim goes) undemocratic and unelected. That’s even more true of the media. Who voted them into the immense positions of power that they occupy. Sometimes/often I wish that they could remind themselves that they are the fourth estate. Oh I know the need for a vital, necessary, honest, probing, fearless media. But not reporters and journalists who are mere stooges. Wolves in sheep’s clothing, parasites on the fears of the public, automata at the command of their masters and proprietors.

Are we not at the end of an era? The post-war paradigm has served us well but is it now about to crumble? Is representative democracy being replaced by populist demagoguery? Are we re-living the 1930s?

On Friday, I spoke to a room full of hundreds of graduates in Oxford. My “commencement address”, after some preliminary words of congratulation, needed to follow an opening statement that goes thus: “this, my dear friends, is the first day of the rest of your lives”. I could only imagine their grief. Seventy-five percent of people under the age of 30 voted to stay in the European Union where they relished the opportunities to travel for work and pleasure and to build a world based on co-operation and a common future. They were devastated by the result.

And what about the hypocrisies of those who, minutes after savaging people and assassinating their reputations, looked into cameras and praised the very people they’d just brutalised in this way?

Questions, worries, sleepless nights, head-scratching, bewilderment, worries, questions. Let me draw from the presence of our Chinese visitors this morning the proverb we all know well: we should be careful what we wish for. And what we vote for.

“I’ll follow you,” said a young man. “Are you sure?” answered Jesus, “I’m a wandering, homeless man. There’s no time or space to settle. Do you think you have what it takes?”

“I’ll come,” said another, “but let me first deal with my dad’s funeral.” “Even that,” said Jesus, “even that must take second place to the new priorities that come with treading the path that I’m treading.”

“Oh but let me say goodbye to my loved ones,” said a third. “You don’t have time to keep looking back,” Jesus declared. “Once you’ve set your hand to the plough, there’s only one way to look. And that’s forward.”

No referendums – constantly looking back, over our shoulder, fearful and timid. Just futureendums. Working out the implications of decisions already taken.

The face of Jesus was set like a flint for the road less travelled – the road signposted “self-sacrifice”, the road that, for all that, is the only one that leads to “self-fulfilment”.

The passage we’ve heard this morning was a favourite of Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Bonhoeffer was a German pastor who rose to prominence in the late 1920s/30s. He worked tirelessly to build relationships across the entire continent of Europe. He was much admired.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer found himself in America in the summer of 1939. He was surrounded by friends and admirers. But the signs from his native Germany were ominous and he was uncomfortable to remain in America. He wrote these words in his diary: “I do not know whether I could have stood the atmosphere here for much longer. It is all terribly sensational, full of hatred, horribly pharasaical.”

So he left the safety of his friends in New York. “The Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head”. Never was he to have such luxury again.

His parents would have preferred him to stay in New York. But he set his face like a flint towards Berlin. “The dead must bury their dead”. Life is about discipleship, following our Lord. It will always have a cost. Indeed, “The Cost of Discipleship” became the most compelling book that Bonhoeffer ever wrote.

He would take part with others in a plot to kill Hitler. For the good of Germany. For the good of Europe. For the good of the whole wide world. That’s radical action. He was arrested. He was hanged just days before the end of the war. “He’d put his hand to the plough and for him there was no looking back.”

And us?

Today?

How ready are we for such radical acts?

I really haven't a clue.

God help us. Amen.