
Hymns: **443** “Come, let us sing of a wonderful love”
 666 “Master speak! Thy servant heareth”
 529 “Prayer is the soul’s sincere desire”
 347 “To God be the glory, great things he has done”

Readings: **1 Corinthians 3:1-9**
 Matthew 5:21-26

“CAUSE AND EFFECT”

I’m just back from Haiti where Margaret and I have been attending celebrations for the 200th anniversary of the arrival of Methodism within that Caribbean land. There was a whole programme of events. It began with a “Partners’ Conference”. This brought together groups and organisations from a number of countries who have been supporting the Methodist Church in Haiti with a wide variety of its projects. I was overwhelmed by what I heard. There seemed a succession of grumbles and a fair bit of discontent being expressed. The local people were blamed for their failure to meet deadlines, their “lack of accountability” and their chaotic administration. I even heard the word “corruption” creep into the discourse. I love the people of Haiti and am accustomed to the way they work. I felt disappointed by these murmurs and rumours which were so obviously on display.

I’d been asked to speak. I got five minutes’ notice and proceeded to give a 45 minute lecture! I tried to explain how, across the whole of Haiti’s history, that land has received such a series of body blows and violation that we shouldn’t be too surprised at the disordered way in which they sometimes undertake their affairs. I brought to their attention the following:

- From the moment Christopher Columbus arrived on the island in 1492 (he called it “Hispaniola” (little Spain), they set about forcing the local Taino and Carib peoples, the indigenous population, into hard labour as they began their search for gold. Within twenty years those lovely people had died either from the nature of the work they’d been subjected to or else the diseases (against which their immune systems had no defences) brought by the Spanish.

- France soon stepped in and began importing huge numbers of slaves from the west coast of Africa. Haiti was France’s richest colony – richer than all its other colonies put together. It achieved this wealth on the back of the densest slave population to be found anywhere in the Americas. 50,000 slaves needed to be brought every year to keep the numbers up, replacing those who had died and coping with the ever-expanding agricultural interests of the planters. On top of all of that, France eventually imposed an indemnity on Haiti after it had achieved its independence (by defeating the armies of Napoleon Bonaparte). The Haitians continued to pay this horrible tax until 15 years ago. Imagine if the UK had imposed a similar indemnity on the USA after 1776!

- Britain saw an opportunity. They brought in an expeditionary force to try to snatch Haiti from its French overlords. 20,000 British soldiers died without a square inch of property or any crock of gold ever being won.
- The international community, once Haiti had become independent in 1804, proceeded to give this newly created nation the cold shoulder. After all, all the neighbouring islands were still operating a slave economy and none of the metropolitan powers wished their slaves to learn from the example of the Haitians.
- The Vatican became a significant player from 1860. A Concordat was signed which effectively passed control of the rising generation and enormous tracts of land over to French priests. It was an exercise in tacit recolonization.
- The USA was the last nation to recognise the independence of Haiti. It could only do so in 1865 after its own Civil War (fought on the question of slavery) had made it possible for the US government to recognise a country run by black people.
- Add natural disasters of various kinds – earthquakes, hurricanes, revolutions, floods and droughts – and you could see how Nature stood alongside the predatory powers in an attempt to humiliate this poor country.
- Between 1915 and 1934 the American army, racist and brutal, occupied Haiti and, by re-drafting its constitution, “legitimised” the ownership of large tracts of land in Haiti which allowed American corporations to rip the heart out of the Haitian economy. This completed the task of taking everything of value out of Haiti forever.

This represented rape. The body politic was violated by this succession of Tsunamis – all of them ripping the natural resources and any residual wealth out of the gut of Haiti. It became the policy of outside nations that Haiti should be kept breathing – but only just.

I gave this lecture in order to help the people who were complaining about the way business is done in Haiti some background information. Indeed, perhaps they might even have recognised a shared responsibility for the fragility of Haitian institutions and the short-comings in their administrative skills. Rather than pour vitriol or offer unbridled criticism of people on the ropes, it would have been better for them to ask a simple question – how did all this come to pass? My lecture was intended to ask precisely that question.

*My speech contracted to a span
And comprehensibly made plain.*

I've tried to give you 45 minutes in 5 or 6!

Something like this lies buried within the teaching of Jesus, the words of which we heard a moment or two ago, part of his Sermon on the Mount.

You see murder or adultery, you hear lies and false witness, and it's easy to be critical. Murder is wrong. Adultery is bad. Lies are almost unforgivable. There's no difficulty in condemning these things. They are so obviously bad or illegal. But it's harder to spot what might have produced the outcome of which we are so critical. What's been going on in someone's heart or personal life that might have caused all of this? Perhaps we shouldn't wait for things to erupt. Perhaps we should engage sensitively with others when the fires of anger, or the dark night of despair, or the swirling currents of resentment are brooding and moving within them. And perhaps too we should be honest with ourselves when all this is happening to us.

Only in this way can we stand a chance of addressing the murky and the chaotic, the dyspeptic and the unworthy motives emanating from our inner selves.

"You have heard..." Jesus said again and again before adding, "but I say...". It's so important to feel and sense someone's pain and anxiety before all of that coalesces and creates problems.

Something similar happens in the Epistle we heard this morning. The Church in Corinth had broken into factions, each gathered around one or another of the founding fathers. Paul and Peter and Apollos each have their groupies. There's no difficulty spotting this and there's equally no problem in seeing just how wrong it is. It's not difficult to identify division within a church, or jealousy, or quarrelling, or schism, - all these are human inclinations. They create sectarianism and they lead to personality worship. All of these are regressive forces and it's not difficult to condemn them and yet our condemnations are so often cheap, superficial, bland. They're made after the event when we might have got closer to things before these outcomes occurred.

This morning we heard on the news about a letter written by retired Bishops condemning a statement put out by the active Bishops of our day on the question of same-sex marriage and sexuality. The retired brothers were highly critical of what, to them, was a mean-minded and ungenerous statement. I couldn't help thinking that, while their judgement is absolutely correct on this matter, they had every opportunity whilst still in active service to ensure that things would go in a more appropriate direction with a far more generous set of provisions.

Apollos and Peter and Paul were three different people, each of them endowed with different gifts and playing different roles. But their overall job was precisely the same. It was to serve the Lord Jesus Christ and to create a community based upon the values inherent in him. It's not surprising that each of them did the job differently. But nobody should have been deluded or seduced by that into some kind of personalised commitments at the expense of support for the cause. They (and we) should not wait for our Church or the world of politics or for those who shape our civil society to be affected by divisive and harmful tendencies and trends. We should never let them become a mere matter of personalities or celebrities or holders of power. We should have got stuck in long before that to introduce transparency and charity that might have avoided such eventualities.

I began with Haiti, let me end with it too. There were two British leaders present in Haiti during the 1870s. They could not have been more different. Spencer St John was the British ambassador there. He attended a “show trial” that sent a dozen Haitian peasants – all poor and bedraggled, all voodoo worshippers, illiterate and uncultured, to their deaths by firing squad. This was part of the Haitian President’s attempt to show the big wide world that his country was now wanting to put a primitive past behind it and embrace the modern world. St John, sitting with his American and French and Spanish colleagues, took a voyeuristic view of these proceedings. He wrote a book called “Hayti, the Black Republic” which settled Haiti’s reputation in the world right down to our day – a primitive and magical place, filled with superstition and evil practices, a dangerous place where fear and darkness reign.

The other British person in Haiti at that time was Mark Baker Bird, the man in charge of the Methodist Church in Haiti. He’d had 40 years of experience of Haiti. He’d travelled amongst Haitian people, he knew them as his friends, as sources of imagination and creativity, as spirit-filled folk. He too wrote a book. It was called “Haiti: un paradis terrestre.” An earthly paradise. He was looking at the same people as were being looked at by Spencer St John. Be he found people he could work with whose troubles he could get to know and whose situation he could seek to improve.

It’s easy to condemn when things go wrong. It’s harder beyond the obvious evidence to see into the heart of the matter and to stand in solidarity with people who are in turmoil and confusion, filled with anger and resentment, overcome with doubt and bewilderment in an effort to improve their condition and change things for the better.

But that’s our job. That’s what it means to have “the mind of Christ”.

Amen.