

Hymns: 526: "Lord of all hopefulness"
520: "Give me, O Lord, a thankful heart"
16: "We give immortal praise"
564: "O thou who camest from above"

Readings: I Corinthians 1: 18-31
Matthew 1: 1-12

Delusional?

Last week, I began my sermon by expressing my pride at the courage of a former member of this church, Hannah Faal-Heim. I reported some words she addressed to the former President of the Gambia, the tyrannous Yahya Jammeh, who was refusing to accept the will of his people and bow out of his country's affairs. I return to that event now, to quote a paragraph in this week's Church Times. These are the words of the Roman Catholic Bishop of Banjul, Fr Peter Lopez. He "spoke of his admiration for the Presiding Bishop of the Methodist Church of the Gambia, the Most Reverend Hannah Faal-Heim, who challenged Mr Jammeh during a meeting on 19th December which was boycotted by many church leaders, many of whom had warned her that Mr Jammeh would have her arrested. "That woman," he declared, "sat right in front of him and told him 'This whole problem is only caused by one man, and that is you.' Everyone was so happy in this country – finally someone in 22 years can sit and tell this man what everyone was feeling, but was afraid to say." As we know, Hannah was not arrested; Mr Jammeh gave up his claims; his successor has now been sworn in; and the people of the Gambia are filled with joy. What vicarious pride we can take in the one-time member of this church who spoke the truth to power in that meeting, armed only with the presence of God's Holy Spirit.

Contrast that with some words from another sermon which I read in the same issue of the Church Times this week. It was part of the address given by the man chosen to preach on the morning of the inauguration of the new President of the United States. I'll quote only a small part of the sermon but it will speak volumes.

“When I think of you, President-Elect Trump, I am reminded of another great leader God chose thousands of years ago in Israel. The nation had been in bondage for generations, the infrastructure of the country was in shambles, and God raised up a powerful leader to restore the nation. And the man God chose was neither a politician nor a priest. Instead, God chose a builder whose name was Nehemiah. And the first step in the rebuilding of the nation was the building of a great wall. God instructed Nehemiah to build a wall around Jerusalem to protect its citizens from any attack. You see, God is *not* against building walls!”

“Christianity is both discredited and disgusting when it is put to such purposes.” So said the newspaper reporter. And so say I. I got into trouble last week for saying one or two things that ventured into the world of politics. I was taken to task in a frank interrogation that took place over coffee in the Radnor Room after the service. So I return to the case with some trepidation. Whatever our political views, our faith, our Bible, must never be traduced in the manner shown by that preacher in Washington. And if saying that gets me into trouble, so be it.

Sermons, sermons, sermons. Last week we considered the first “sermon” of Jesus as he began his ministry. “Repent, for the Kingdom of God is at hand.” Just a snatch from what must have been a longer address. This week, by contrast, we have the opening words of the most substantial sermon preached by Jesus. The Sermon on the Mount lays out Jesus’s case in some detail. It’s spelled out across three chapters of St Matthew’s gospel. If I were abandoned on a desert island and could only have one object to keep me going, it would be the four pages of my New Testament where this testament for living is laid out. And it begins by describing a topsy turvy world. Instead of a world where the mighty and powerful occupy pride of place, where the rich live in glory while the poor grovel for any droppings from their table, a world run by the whim of its rulers, who include megalomaniacs and kleptomaniacs, despots and tinpots, the incompetent and the corrupt, instead of all that we find a social order where those previously rejected or despised, marginalised or oppressed, kicked out of things or physically threatened for getting into things, now have a part, an honoured part, to play in the ordering of social life. Just listen to the description of the world as Jesus envisioned it:

Blessed are the poor in spirit, those who are depressed and dejected at the way the world is going, those who are tempted to follow populist and nationalist leaders, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Blessed are those who mourn, the tears shall be wiped from their eyes, and they will be comforted.

Blessed are the meek, for they shall overcome their fear of the strong and the powerful, the commanders and the dictators and they shall inherit the earth.

Blessed are those who hunger and thirst after righteousness, the campaigners for social justice, those who long for a tolerant and fair world, for they will be satisfied.

Blessed are the merciful, who know that the quality of mercy is not strained that it is twice blessed. It blesseth him that gives and him that takes. 'Tis mightiest in the mighty. It becomes the thronèd monarch better than his crown. Mercy is above the sceptred sway of kings (and, we might add for good measure, presidents too) and they, if merciful themselves, will receive mercy.

Blessed are the pure in heart, those who have retained their integrity, remained honest, refused to bow the knee to greed and trickery, for they will see God.

Blessed are the peacemakers, God only knows how much we need them just now, in our personal relationships, our community affairs, our national debates and in international affairs, for they will be called children of God.

Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, Christians in the Middle East, Ahmadiya Moslems in Pakistan, Jews enduring never-ending anti-semitism, and so many others too, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kind of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way the persecuted the prophets who were before you.

It's a topsy turvy world where the poor in spirit, those who mourn, the meek, the campaigners for a fairer world, the merciful and those untainted by wickedness, the peacemakers and the persecuted, are the pace makers, the bench markers, deal-makers for a world order that measures up to God's plan for us all.

Sigmund Freud's dismissal of religion was based on his conviction that faith is little more than an "infantile illusion", like whistling in the dark to keep one's spirits up. As St Paul notes in this morning's reading, Freud's view merely echoes other objections that have been levelled against the Christian faith from the very earliest days. Some pooh-poohed Christian claims because they were based on apparent weakness – isn't the gallows from which a convicted criminal hung the most obvious proof of that? Others wondered how anyone could make a serious claim for a faith that was so clearly based in failure. The cross spelled out little more than woeful weakness and foolish failure. And we can see how all this comes about.

The world cries out for strong leadership. Peoples vest their trust in titans. And down the centuries we've had more than our fill of them. And where exactly are we for all the strong leadership we've experienced? Pretty near the cliff edge, that's where.

The cross speaks of qualities far nobler than mere failure and abject folly. It speaks of unconditional love, a radically different way of "doing life." And, in my opinion, we ignore its claims and its lessons at our peril. What exactly did Mahatma Gandhi, Martin Luther King, Abraham Lincoln and Nelson Mandela have in common. It was that they recognized the cul-de-sacs of brute power and identified the need to appeal to something quite different – decency, justice (for all, not for some), integrity in public life, a readiness to stand up for righteousness even at the cost of their own comfort. The cross throws light on this way of looking at the world and we neglect its message at our peril.

"I have a dream..." Those are words that conjure up immediately the larger-than-life character of Martin Luther King. But I associate them with another great man from recent American history.

In 1976, I found myself visiting Norfolk, Virginia, a great naval base and a strongly conservative part of the USA. I was there on my own. I'd left my wife Margaret with our three small children back in London. Our boys were just 4 and 2 years old, our daughter less than a year. I visited a museum where, among the items of a very eclectic art collection, I found a corner dedicated to the memory of General Douglas MacArthur and huge figure in the recent military history of his country. He'd commanded the Allied forces in the Southern Pacific Ocean and the role he played in the Philippines, Japan and (later) in Korea was vast. He had almost unimaginable powers and ruled that theatre of the war like a king. When he was forced into exile in Australia, he

said quite simply “I will be back,” a little phrase that appealed to the public just like MLK’s “I have a dream” in later years.

He had a son for whom he’d written a prayer that I’ve kept close to me ever since. In it he expressed the hope that his son would possess the qualities of leadership he most admired and which would be most needed in the years following the war. It runs thus:

Build me a son, O Lord,

*who will be strong enough to know when he is weak,
and brave enough to face himself when he is afraid,
one who will be proud and unbending in honest defeat,
and humble and gentle in victory.*

Build me a son, O Lord,

*whose wishes will not take the place of deeds,
a son who will know Thee,
and that to know himself is the foundation stone of knowledge.*

Lead him, I pray,

*not in the path of ease and comfort,
but under the stress and spur of difficulties and challenge.
Here let him learn to stand up in the storm,
here let him learn compassion for those who fail.*

Build me a son, O Lord,

*whose heart will be clear,
whose goal will be high,
a son who will master himself before he seeks to master others,
one who will reach into the future*

yet never forget the past.

And after these things are his, add, I pray

enough of a sense of humour so that

he may always be serious yet never take himself too seriously.

Give him humility, so that

he may always remember the simplicity of true greatness,

the open mind of true wisdom,

and the meekness of true strength.

Then I, his father, will dare to whisper, "I have not lived in vain."

I've been very hard on those at the head of American political life in recent weeks. So I'm glad to end with this prayer of one of America's greatest soldiers, a man who really worked hard to make America great, and whose legacy shaped the whole world in the decades following the Second World War.

It may be delusional to hope for that qualities such as those listed in this prayer might ever become the cornerstone of a new world order. But no more delusional than that the virtues praised by Jesus in his Sermon on the Mount should one day focus humanity's focus on the values and principles upon which God's will for the world might be expressed.

We're a long way away from that right now. But it's what we ought to be praying and working for.

Amen.