16 August 2018: Choral Eucharist

Thursdays during Ordinary Time

Ezekiel 12: 1–12, Matthew 18: 21 – 19:1

The Very Revd Robert Grimley, Honorary Cathedral Chaplain

The opening words of our first lesson in a slightly less formal translation (The Message):

Son of man, you’re living with a bunch of rebellious people. They have eyes but don’t see a thing, they have ears but don’t hear a thing (Ezekiel 12: 2)

I sympathise if you began to feel that you had lost the plot in that first lesson, with its strange tale of the prophet breaking out of his own house, and going away with his head covered, but in fact once you’ve got your mind around it, it makes perfect sense. God was commiserating with the prophet Ezekiel in the words that I’ve just quoted: he had commanded him to warn the people of Israel that they were betraying God, and their society was breaking down, because they had abandoned justice and integrity and the practice of true religion. They, however, would not take any notice of his warnings that if they didn’t mend their ways God would punish them by sending them into exile – “they have eyes but don’t see a thing, they have ears, but don’t hear a thing”. A few verses after the passage we heard, those ridiculing the prophet and his message about God’s warnings of judgement accuse him of spreading fake news. Just as modern politicians or zealots for a cause cry “Fake news!” as a knee-jerk reaction to any opinion or facts that they find unwelcome or inconvenient, so those who didn’t want to hear Ezekiel’s message of judgement mocked him by saying, ‘Everything will go on as normal; all the prophetic warnings are false alarms’ (Ezekiel 12: 22).

It was to try to break through this complacency that the prophet was told to make God’s message by acting it out, as well as delivering it by word of mouth. So Ezekiel publicly put together the pathetic bundle that is a refugee’s survival kit, and he heaved it on his shoulders to try to bring home to the nation’s leaders what exile would mean; and God told him to cover his face, as if he couldn’t bear to look at the home country which exiles would never see again. But the people scornfully refused to pay any attention to the prophet.
In our own time we too often witness a swirling torrent of anger and abuse, instead of civil discourse about complicated and important issues; true facts are dismissed as fake news: and I don’t mean only from the White House, which first made the cry of “Fake news!” into a weapon; it is there in the warring armies of zealots on both sides of threatening issues such as anti-Semitism, Islamophobia, Brexit, the Salisbury attack with the nerve agent Novichok, and so on. Reasoned debate about such thorny issues is vital, but our society is undermined when partisans on either side repeatedly deny obvious truths, or deliberately repeat lies, because they think that by doing so they can so confuse the issue, and more effectively prevail whatever the facts might be.

I want to take just one example to show the human cost of a post-truth world. It happens to come from the area of anti-Semitism and the Israel-Palestinian conflicts, but I am not advocating any particular position on those issues, just sharing the example with you. In a recent article in The Times (24th July 2018), the highly respected commentator Danny Finkelstein said that he became convinced of the case for Jews having a national home in Israel, when he listened to his mother telling him about the people who had left Belsen concentration camp with her, but then found themselves homeless. (His father also came from a family which had had to flee Nazi persecution.) He went on, “Complacently, I had always assumed that what happened to my parents couldn’t happen to me or my children. There were too many liberal, progressive people who wouldn’t allow it. I no longer believe this with the same confidence.” Touchingly, he says that in drafting the article he twice removed the sentence about no longer having confidence that there are enough right-minded people to ensure that what happened to his parents couldn’t happen again, but, he says, in the end “I left it in because, sadly, it’s true.” He goes on to say that it is not the anti-Semitism itself which frightens him, but the fact that there are too many people who deny that there is any anti-Semitism, and who, instead of saying it must be rooted out, greet complaints of anti-Semitic abuse with aggression and anger, saying that such public complaints are evidence of a nefarious Jewish and Zionist plot.

As Danny Finkelstein would agree, there is room for reasoned debate about how serious the danger is that he flags up. I have simply focused on what he has written because we as Christians need to be seriously worried about the state of our society when someone well regarded in public life feels he must write in such terms. We need to be vigilant that we do not allow our understanding of right and wrong to be distorted by the post-truth ideologues, and we need to be ready to speak out against such hatred in private.
conversations, as well as in more public contexts, because silence can all too easily be nothing other than collusion.

Let me finish with what the Bishop of Manchester said about combatting hatred on the Radio 4 “Thought for the Day” yesterday morning: “Small acts of goodness mount up, until they wear down the will of our aggressors.” [repeat] Let that be our watchword in these turbulent times.

Amen