17 February 2019: Choral Matins

Psalm 52, Jeremiah 30:1–3, 10–22, Acts 6

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For I am with you, says the LORD, to save you…
And you shall be my people, / and I will be your God.

In nomine...

I was struck by an image in the newspaper a few weeks’ ago. It showed two Brexit protesters outside parliament. Nothing unusual there, you might think: if you’ve been to Westminster in recent months you can hardly have failed to spot the squads of Leavers and Remainers vociferously advocating their causes, inviting passing traffic to hoot in support. But this picture was different because it showed two protesters, one Remainer and one Leaver, with their faces pressed literally nose to nose. The caption described it as a confrontation, but the odd thing was that the facial expressions betrayed no engagement whatsoever. It was as if, despite their intense proximity, they could in fact hardly register each other’s presence. This wasn’t so much a confrontation as a juxtaposition: eyes open, but seeing nothing; no dialogue, no real conflict even, just the blank presence face to face of two opposing views; visually dramatic, but in practice meaningless: as free of real substance as much of the public debate around these issues has been both before and since the referendum.

Now, were I Professor Biggar, I could offer a coherent diagnosis of our current national predicament, but I am not Canon Biggar nor was meant to be, so I would like merely to suggest some ways in which today’s readings may help us to see God at work: to lighten our present darkness and defend us from its perils and dangers. My first point concerns the name – or, perhaps better, the names – of God and what they tell us about God’s ways with us and the world; my second point is about the nature of service, the ministry of Stephen and the six other deacons on whom hands are laid in our reading from the Acts of the Apostles; and my third point is about compassion: God’s compassion to us and our compassion to one another.
A Rabbinic commentary on Book Exodus says this of the famous verse in the third chapter where God’s name is made known to Moses:

Rabbi Abba bar Mammel said: God said to Moses: I am called according to my acts. At times I am called El Shaddai, Seba’ot, Elohim and the LORD. When I judge creatures, I am called Elohim; when I forgive sins, I am called El Shaddai; when I wage war against the wicked, I am called Seba’ot; and when I show compassion for my world, I am called the LORD. (cited from Oliver Davies, A Theology of Compassion)

As so often, despite the twenty volumes of the OED, our native tongue falls short when attempting to deal with God and the things of God: Latin, Greek and Hebrew each in their different ways have a range and a flexibility that English lacks.

Our word ‘God’ is a precious one, not to be taken in vain, but the names of God in the scriptures are manifold: they cannot be boxed in within those three letters over which it is so easy for us to assume ownership. The rabbinic commentary offers us the four great Jewish names for God and tells us something of their different weight and resonance – God of judgement, God of forgiveness, God of righteousness, God of compassion – but the scriptures range well beyond these four. Think of all the metaphorical names of God the Bible gives us: Father, Rock, One, King, Judge, Vine-keeper and many more. Think, too, of those phrases which unfold for us God’s name in greater richness, two of which sounded out from this morning’s first lesson:

For I am with you, says the LORD, to save you…
And you shall be my people, / and I will be your God.

These, also, are names of God. We ask, like Moses, ‘who shall I say has sent me? what is your name?’; and God in the scriptures answers: ‘I am with you to save you’ has sent me to you; ‘You shall be my people and I will be your God’ has sent me to you.

So much on the names of God. My second point is about the nature of service. In our second lesson we heard of the appointment of Stephen and his six fellow deacons to carry out the practical work of pastoral care. The twelve apostles call a meeting and its upshot is the declaration we heard:

‘It is not right that we should neglect the word of God in order to wait at tables.
Therefore, friends, select from among yourselves seven men of good standing, full
of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we may appoint to this task, while we, for our part, will devote ourselves to prayer and to serving the word.’

With lovely understatement Luke, the author of Acts, undercuts the mild pomposity of the apostles’ decision. Just a few verses later we hear that Stephen, ‘full of grace and power, did great wonders and signs among the people’, and in a later chapter Stephen proceeds to deliver what has been rightly described as ‘one of the most rhetorically powerful and scripturally learned exercises of the ministry of the word [in the NT]’ (Pelikan, p.93). He may be only a deacon, but it is clear that waiting at tables does not cause him to neglect the word of God. Stephen’s example shows that service and proclamation go hand in hand: the word is proclaimed both verbally and practically.

What happens if we put these two points together?: the abundance of names for God; and the call to make those names known in the diaconal service of God in word and deed.

The three letters of our word God contain an unimaginable wealth that is best understood through the lens of those parables of Jesus, which enlarge, overflow and confound our imaginations: the good measure pressed down, shaken together and running over’ (Luke 6:38), the water turned into vast quantities of wine (John 2), the miniscule mustard seed that grows into a tree great enough for the birds of the air to make their nests in its branches (Luke 13:18-19). In these and countless other instances in the pages of scripture we are given a vivid insight into the boundless compassion of God: God who runs to greet us when we turn to him, who calls us out of pride and isolation to undefended service, of him in one another.

The photograph with which I began haunts me because it seems to show just the opposite of all this. Two human beings so shut up in their own perspective that they are unable to see the person directly in front of them. In scriptural terms it is hard not to see this as a form of idolatry:

They have mouths, and speak not: eyes have they, but they see not.

They have ears, and yet they hear not: neither is there any breath in their mouth.

We all run this risk – of being trapped in the echo chamber of our own world-view – and it is, I think, a risk of idolatry: of worshipping that which is not only less than God, but antithetical to God. Faced with the challenge of Brexit and all its associated risks, not least the risk of complete mutual misunderstanding, this morning’s readings point us back to the abundance of God, who reaches out to us in our plight. God has no mouth,
but speaks; has no eyes, but sees; has no ears, but hears; and has the breath of life in his mouth. Only in response to God’s infinite compassion may we hope to see and hear clearly and speak and live in righteousness.

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