23 September 2018: Choral Matins

The Seventeenth Sunday after Trinity

Isaiah 45: 9–22, Revelation 14: 1–5

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I am in the mountains, in a trailer set apart from a small Christian community. In the morning and the evening I am visited by a large pack of baboons who have grown used to me, and I to them. I can’t see the sea but I can smell it, and at night I lie in bed and watch the moon sail across a carapace of constellations out beyond the Milky Way. During the day I’m trying to think high theological thoughts, reading St. Augustine on music, and wrestling with the relationship between Christ and creation, and what that means for the redemption of the world. But down below, in the valley, is the township of Zwelihli. It’s a small but very overcrowded township; not on any road map because the official road maps of South Africa don’t mark the townships that cluster like satellites around towns and cities. Some of the townships still don’t officially exist. The overcrowding into a tight area bordered by the sea is due to various African migrations. There’s unemployment everywhere on the continent and so people flood from the Eastern Cape, Zimbabwe, Swaziland, Botswana, Mozambique, even Somalia and South Sudan to the more prosperous Western Cape. If you’re poor and black the township is the only place to go, and so, as the overcrowding worsens, the violence flares and finds a focus in the black migrants who are not South African born. The houses and belongings of migrants are targeted, looted and burnt, and people stopped from leaving the township to go to work. No work, no money, no food. It’s as basic as that. I meet Sonia, a domestic worker from Zimbabwe, living in the township with her husband. She tells me about her miracle babies: twins born at 24 weeks that survived beyond incalculable odds in Africa. They’re ten now but there’s no room for them to stay in the township. She sees them when she can. They live with their grandmother in Zimbabwe, a journey of two days by bus from the Western Cape. All the money she and husband can save they send back to the grandmother. She doesn’t see her miracle babies for months at a time. She doesn’t weep as she speaks to me. She just stares through me and I find the pain intolerable.
I return to Oxford, to my house in Tom Quad with its own private garden where my roses and geraniums have, incredibly, survived the long heat wave. The rooms are still warm from the summer and the fountain plays until dusk turns to darkness. Its cloudy, windy, wet at times, but when the sun appears a blue sky forms a high canopy above the honey-coloured walls of the college. The bells peel the hours and heavy fruit hang from the apple and pear trees. But outside I walk through the Covered Market where more and more small businesses have closed. Along Cornmarket and St. Giles old sleeping bags fill doorways of shops that have not been sealed off. There are collections of the homeless and mentally challenged sitting, sheltering, smoking, drinking – people of all ages, boys, men, girls, women. Anxious people pass each other, listening to news of Brexit, unsure of the future, worried about their own employment, and sensing that things seem not just unstable but chaotic and failing somehow. Only the tourists appear hopeful. But they’re not staying. And on insomniac nights beyond the crenelated walls of the college I hear shouts and passing sirens as if there’s a party out there in the darkness beyond all control and desperate for some escape.

How do we reconcile these worlds? How do we reconcile the brokenness of things with the beauty? How do we reconcile the Gospel, the good news in Christ, with the pain, the daily pain we have to encounter and cannot ignore?

I turn to the Bible, and our first lesson this morning. Egyptians, Nubians and Sabaeans “will come into your power and be your slaves, will come and follow you in chains; they will bow down in submission.” In Isaiah’s context, this verse may have signified liberation, but today I don’t want slaves. We have had enough of slavery, chains and being enslaved. And I don’t want my deliverance or anyone else’s to come on the back of vengeance. The cycles of victims and vengeance are the cycles of sin; they won’t help anyone long term. “Rain righteousness, you heavens, let the skies above pour it down, let the earth open for it that salvation might flourish.” Yes, that verse resonates: the knowledge, deep within us and between us, that God is with us. “I the Lord speak what is right, I declare what is just.” This, by faith, we grasp and bear witness to. There is an endurance required by those who desire to be faithful. Our second Biblical passage from the Book of Revelation sketches – those who have been faithful learning a new song in realms we cannot access in which the Lamb, once slaughtered, Jesus Christ, stands as creation’s redeemer.

In Paul’s second letter to the church at Corinth, he writes: “God was in Christ, reconciling the world to himself, not counted people’s sin against them. And he has
committed to us the message of reconciliation.” Yes, God has to work a reconciliation across the broken worlds we see around us. And how is that done? Well, reconciliation can only come through the healing of relationships, and first and foremost our relationship with God. Reconciled with God then God in Christ can affect all our other relationships; can move in and through beyond us to transform other relationships, with each other and with creation as a whole. We, alone, cannot reconcile and the world just fragments as we touch it. I cannot resolve the racial tensions and the just distribution of wealth and property in South Africa. I cannot resolve the economic tensions in this country that divide the very poor from the very wealthy. And I have no solutions to the Brexit conundrum. But we, the church, have been given the commission to effect the reconciliation with God through Christ by our faithfulness and His empowering grace. That is the boldness of our hope and, at times, it takes courage to hold fast to that hope. What each of us has been given is a small circle of relationships to each other and the rest of creation in which we have been placed by divine providence. That is the sphere of our ministry, the test of our faithfulness, and the scene of our witness that God is with us. Have you noticed, looking round this building, this cathedral, how it is a house of rainbows? Everywhere, rainbows: round the windows, most of the doors and between the pillars that structure the aisles and transepts. Great stone arcs of covenantal promise that span spatial separations. It is a proclamation of the gospel, a testimony to what holds us, not just the building, together. They reconcile us one with another, enfolding us in the mercy, love and justice of God. They constitute the message of reconciliation in and through Christ which has been committed to us. They tell us to go in the peace of Christ to love and serve the world.