Christ Church Cathedral
Oxford

25 August 2019: Choral Eucharist
The Tenth Sunday after Trinity
The Revd Canon Grant Bayliss, Diocesan Canon Precentor
‘Swimming against the Flow’

The great sermon-writer Charles Spurgeon recounts the story of a certain Quaker he knew in nineteenth century London. One day he was bathing in the Thames, and a waterman called out to him, "Ha! there goes the Quaker." "How do you know I'm a Quaker?" "Because you swim against the stream; it is the way the Quakers always do."

At first sight our Old Testament reading and Gospel seem to be pulling us in very different directions. Isaiah tells us how important it is to keep the Sabbath, to call it a delight and to refrain from trampling on it (Is. 58:13); and then Jesus in the Gospel works on the Sabbath by healing the woman, much to the outrage of the synagogue leaders (Lk. 13:12–16). But when we stop to look more closely at both, they have a deeper truth in common. In Isaiah there is a clear parallel (so typical of Hebrew poetry) between keeping the Sabbath and the moral call to offer food to the hungry and satisfy the afflicted, to remove the yoke from among you, take away the pointing fingers and speaking of evil (Is. 58:9–10). The different way of life that is to mark God’s people runs not just against the tide of human busy-ness and desire for profit but against anything that reduces people to less than God has made them be, that enslaves, ensnares or diminishes.

So when Jesus swims against the tide of the religious leaders of his own day, it is to bring out that deep parallel – that keeping the Sabbath day holy is far more about healing and wholeness than about rest from activity. This is not simply him being anti-legalistic. Notice his argument – a rabbinic principle known as qal vahomer or ‘arguing from the lesser to the greater’ – if one knows it is right to untie an ox or donkey on the Sabbath to feed and water it, how much more to set free a daughter of Abraham (Lk. 13:15–16).

Faith is not a simple unthinking following of a list of rules, whether from the Old Testament or the New, but something deeper that runs more fundamentally counter to the world, that swims against the currents of much of our society, both then and now. In
his prayer to the Father on the night before he died, Jesus would say how all who truly follow him are in the world but not of it (Jn. 17:16); and the Letter to the Hebrews too reminds us how far beyond daily experience we are called, not to something that can be touched, not even to the blazing fire, darkness, gloom, tempest or trumpet-sound of the theophany to Moses on Mount Sinai (Heb. 12:18–19); but to something other and beyond – “to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, to innumerable angels..., to the assembly of the firstborn... and to God the judge of all” (Heb. 12:22).

This is no great *crie-de-coeur* for a rejection of our modern culture and return to a simpler way of life with no cars, no mobile phones, no contact with civilisation. Jesus never calls us to be escape artists or to flee from the world in any way. Just the opposite. He sends us into the world to be the lamp on the stand (Mt. 5:15), the city on the hilltop (Mt. 5:14), the salt in the food (Mt. 5:13), the yeast in the dough (Mt. 13:33). We are actively sent into the world to change it. Not change it by conflict, not change it by becoming part of it but to change it by being true to ourselves. We are simply to be in the world, to be as Christians, to endure the slings and arrows that brings without flinching, and our very presence will change things.

In the world but not of it – people marked by God’s own Sabbath rest, people marked by God’s own compassion, both called and calling others to be who God has made us to be. If we take the Gospel message seriously, we are the foreigners, we are the asylum seekers, we are the people who don’t belong, those who swim against the stream. According to the great types of the Old Testament, we are sojourning here, we are in exile, beside the waters of Babylon (Ps. 137:1). And sometimes we may well want to sit down and weep. We may well want to either give up and become like the world or flee away from it to somewhere safe but our calling is to stay here as exiles for a time.

It’s there as a mystical truth throughout the Epistles, the sense of being part of the Body of Christ (1 Cor. 12:27), temples of the Spirit (1 Cor. 6:19), a living stone of the New Jerusalem (1 Peter 2:5). But mystical truths need to be grounded in real life. So what of our daily behaviour?

Well, perhaps, part of it is to be people who ask questions. Questions of old and established truths, questions of new and trendy ideas. We must be seekers after truth. For it is truth we come from, truth we are being led into and truth to which we must witness. This should not make us cynical or sarcastic as so many of the commentators that litter our media society. Rather our probing questions should be asked first and foremost of
ourselves. Our mission is not to condemn the world but to live holy lives within it. Not to change the current or to shout at it that it is going the wrong way but to swim confidently against it. Purposeful stroke after purposeful stroke, in the direction of our Lord and Saviour.

Yeast does not fight the dough, it does not condemn it. It remains true to itself and so without being changed it changes all around it.

This is not a silent, unprotesting way of life but it is a way of life that speaks more loudly through actions than words. To speak against our contemporary society and way of life should be something shrieked by every fibre of our being, every aspect of our lifestyle. However, it takes confidence, it takes patience and above all it takes self-awareness and honesty. A willingness to always look first to ourselves and what we could do better rather than blame the flaws of others. So much easier to go with the flow and merely moan about it. To be carried along by the waves in something of a sulk.

Let us not launch diatribes against the culture and world we live in, but let us question it and question ourselves by the standards of the truth. Whether we need to speak up for Sabbath rest and spiritual flourishing against the economic and social pressures of our world, like Isaiah; or to speak up for empathy and compassion against religious prescriptions and expectations, like Jesus. Let us truly seek to live as people of the truth, people whose faith marks them out, like the Quaker from our story. For that is the sort of thanks that is “an acceptable offering of worship with reverence and awe” before our God the consuming fire (Heb. 12:28–29).