25 August 2019: Said Matins with Hymns
The Tenth Sunday after Trinity
Jonah 2, Revelation 1
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+ From the psalm: ‘In my trouble I will call upon the Lord and complain unto my God. So shall he hear my voice out of his holy temple and my complaint shall come before him.’ (Ps 18: 5-6)

The Succentor preached last week at Matins about how to read Scripture well. We had heard the first chapter of the book of the minor prophet, Jonah, and Philippa talked about the need to recognise that Jonah is a carefully – artistically – constructed story, a fiction. Together with the books of Ruth and Esther, the stories in the first six chapters of Daniel and the apocryphal Tobit and Judith, these biblical texts are often described as Jewish novels. They all take the form of stories about a fictitious character, which have been composed as a finished whole with consistent narrative flow and well-constructed plots. As John Barton argues in his recent, magisterial History of the Bible, they show few signs of resting on older folktales and oral traditions.

They are alike in telling implausible narratives but of all of them Jonah provides the tallest tale, requiring us to suspend all our disbelief to imagine him swallowed up into the body of a great fish and then spewed out alive onto the dry land. Even if some believers like to take an interest in the supposed existence of enormous fish in the Mediterranean, capable of swallowing a man, few modern readers want to read Jonah as narrative based on any historical truth. It’s a parable, as Philippa said last week, an edifying tale with a clear moral. If one’s mind naturally turns towards typological reading of scripture, one could think about how the three days that Jonah spent in the fish – in the belly of Sheol – might prefigure the three days that Christ spent in the tomb between his death on the cross and his resurrection.

The whole story of Jonah contains a number of moral teachings about God’s relationship with humanity, his capacity for forgiveness, and about salvation. If we want to search for meaning behind the part of the fable that we heard this morning, we might focus on
Jonah’s prayer from the belly of the fish. At the moment of his greatest need, when he was the farthest possible place from any place of worship, Jonah remembered the Lord. In words that echo those verses from our psalm that I just quoted, Jonah’s prayer came to God in his holy Temple. We may be reassured that when we, too, find ourselves in the greatest need, however distant we may be physically or emotionally from a church or place of prayer, yet God will hear us and respond to our needs. ‘Deliverance belongs to the Lord.’ And his promises of salvation are available to us all the time, not just when we are dutifully sitting in churches singing hymns and listening to sermons.

I had already started to think about what I might say this morning when I read the news in last week’s Church Times that the diocese of Oxford has announced plans to establish up to 750 new congregations in order, as the Bishop explained, ‘to reach people untouched by traditional church because they are physically or culturally too far away’. In this diocese as elsewhere, Sunday church attendance and other types of engagement with the traditional church have fallen sharply since the Second World War. So I have to admit that I found myself wondering whether providing more congregations was really the answer to declining numbers. Even though this plan draws on the proven success of the Fresh Expressions of Church movement with which our bishop has long been involved, and the plan is to think about how to spread God’s word outside our normal patterns of ministry, there must be a risk that these initiatives will end up spreading the church-going faithful yet more thinly.

The moral I drew from the Jonah story was that God is to be found wherever we are; he is not confined by church or temple. One of the limitations of an over-simplistic understanding of the secularisation of contemporary western societies is a tendency too readily to equate church attendance (or other forms of direct engagement with acts of worship) with religious sentiment. Yet there is significant evidence from Britain and elsewhere in Europe that while congregations are unquestionably shrinking, belief in the existence of one or more divine powers persists strongly in many cultures. And those beliefs find expression in ways that don’t necessarily involve clergy or churches. They work by transposition just as the story of Jonah works by transposition.

Those of you who know that in my day job I am the professor of church history will not be entirely surprised to learn that, when on holiday, I spend a good deal of time visiting historic churches, cathedrals and abbeys. Not, generally, in order to attend acts of worship, but to wander round and admire the architecture, the decoration, furnishing and paintings and to get a sense of the spiritual flavour of each place. In France, where
we have just spent three weeks, this can prove a rather frustrating activity. Many rural
and urban churches are kept locked, and one can never find a key. Others, located at
more celebrated sites or that have important historical artefacts preserved within them are
open, but tend to be run as tourist attractions, rather than as places of pilgrimage or
religious encounter. The separation of church and state in France, reified in law since
1905, is particularly relevant to the way in which former monasteries are treated: heavily
(heavy-handedly) restored, they are now ‘ancient monuments’, part of the state’s
patrimony along with Roman amphitheatres or medieval castles; they no longer feel like
sacred sites.

Some explanation for the apparent lack of interest among the French in church buildings
may be found in statistical studies that reveal how sharply religion has declined since the
1980s, when 82% of the population were Christians (of whom 81% were catholics). By
2016, the percentage of Christians had fallen to 51, while 40% claimed to have no religion
at all. Other research has confirmed this remarkably high proportion of non-believers,
something that makes France one of the most irreligious countries in the world. It is also
a country with a long history of anti-clericalism.

But on our same holiday this summer we noticed for the first time how very differently
cemeteries are treated from churches: they are very easy to find (often signed as you enter
a town or village), and in our experience they were universally open, beautifully kept and
carefully tended, with neatly raked gravel paths between the rows of graves. We walked
round several, admiring family plots with dedications to aged grandparents and poignant
memorials to dead infants and young adults. Many graves had fresh flowers, or recently
watered plants; we saw no dead bouquets in wilting plastic wrappings, none of the
tumble down or broken gravestones that so often characterise an English country
graveyard. And all – or almost all – the tombs we looked at bore Christian symbols and
quotations of a devotional nature (as well as statements about familial relationships and
more modern secular tags). The only grave that we saw which was neglected and
overgrown with weeds was, perhaps explicity enough, that of Albert Camus in the little
village of Lourmarin on the Luberon. It takes the form of a plain stone, bearing nothing
but his name and dates of birth and death. Now a tourist attraction, it is signposted from
the entrance to the cemetery for the benefit of strangers; no family tends that grave.

Yet otherwise what these graveyards reveal is a Christian religion that is alive and
flourishing. Here the bible is remembered, Christ’s sacrifice on the cross often depicted
in word and image, as are the alpha and the omega, echoing that line from today’s second
reading, I am the Alpha and the Omega, says the Lord God, who is and who was and who is to come. (Rev 1: 8). Sites of memory for the families whose ancestors are buried together, these are also locations where in grief and mourning people have manifestly found God. They have called on him in his holy temple and they have found comfort in so doing. That all these graves, in so many villages across France are regularly visited is obvious from the condition in which all are to be found. And in every cemetery that we visited, I felt palpably the presence of God and a consciousness of the prayers prayed by others in those places, prayers that had been heard. Like Eliot’s Little Gidding, these are places where prayer has been valid.

How do we explain this? Is this a manifestation of religion without church? Clergy have obviously been involved and had a part to play, not just in the funerary rites for the dead but perhaps also in assisting with the formulation of language for memorial stones. But they have no continuing function in these places. These plots do not belong to the church and they are not located in sacred ground; they are manifestly owned by local councils, their upkeep maintained with some pride by town, or village, or commune, for the benefit of mourners who make regular visits to their family graves.

The statistics about church attendance (and indeed about residual religious sentiment) do not, I think, tell the whole story about the fate of religion in contemporary western societies including our own. France is a special case, not only because of the significant proportion of the population that declares itself to have no faith at all, but because of its history of separation of church and state and its tradition of anticlericalism. But I do think that there is a message for us that we can read from the stark contrast I have observed in France between attitudes towards churches and cemeteries. And that is that we should never forget that God is to be found everywhere, and makes his presence known in contexts and among people where those of us who define religion in purely ecclesial terms might not think to seek him out.

That is easy to say, but finding an appropriate response is much harder. And I don’t have any solutions. One might, as this diocese will try, look to create more congregations in new places. Others have sought ways to bring different sorts of people inside historic churches by making them look less like churches. The poppy fields exhibition marking the anniversary of the Armistice last autumn proved very successful at doing just that here and in other cathedrals; Rochester’s crazy golf and Norwich’s helter-skelter have met with more mixed response, yet both unquestionably reached out to non-church goers.
I believe that the real challenge presented to us, the diminishing band of the faithful who choose to express our devotion through organised acts of worship, is that we need to be more sensitive and attuned to the presence of God away from the Church. Instead of trying to make the Church more like the world outside, we should more actively seek out where God is already to be found beyond its walls and open ourselves to recognise when we encounter him in the faces and the deeds of others. Further, we need, as a Church, to find ways of acknowledging and responding to the religious sentiments of the many people among whom we live and work who believe in God and in his redeeming power, but who seldom voice that belief (and who do not choose to share in the Church’s worship). They, too, work in unconscious transposition, acting out in life and behaviour attitudes once locked in liturgy and gospel. Their stories need to be read, like Jonah’s, like those of the French dead, not for what they say but for what they mean.