8 July 2018: Said Matins
The Sixth Sunday after Trinity
Psalm 9: 1-10; Deuteronomy 24: 10-22; Acts 28: 1-16

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‘The Politics of God’

All week I’ve felt I was getting political. If you’re in the throes of writing a sermon then the feeling that you’re getting political is the equal of knowing you’re going down with a very bad cold. Not that I don’t have political opinions. I do. And not that I have any objection to speaking out about those opinions. I don’t. But I’m not at all sure that’s what being up here in the pulpit is about. There’s enough pundits and spin doctors out there without me getting up on a soap-box. And, more significantly, church decorum (nowhere written down, but absolutely rigid even though unspoken) doesn’t allow you to speak. You the congregation. You are condemned, sitting down there, to listen. And goodness knows how much sucking up sawdust that has been at times! I won’t enquire. And you’re not in any position to tell me. Not while I’m up here. By the door going out you might just mention that I’m dangerously misguided on this teaching or that. But up here, spouting whatever I spout, you’re a captive audience. And so I don’t like getting political when there is so little possibility of challenge, contestation and debate. So when someone who is preparing to deliver a sermon feels that they are getting political it’s like a Victorian saying they are ‘indisposed’. So the best I can do is apologise in advance and take a leaf from St. Paul who once wrote to one of the churches in his care insisting that what he had to say to them may not have a divine warrant at all. So they must discern the truth of it for themselves.

But I knew, when I read that first lesson this morning from the book of Deuteronomy, that a bad bout of the political was about to take hold of me. “You must not deprive aliens and the fatherless of justice or take a widow’s cloak in pledge… Bear in mind that you were slaves in Egypt and the Lord redeemed you…When you reap the harvest in your field and overlook a sheaf, do not go back to pick it up; it is to be left to the alien, the fatherless, and the widow.” What is it here that strikes me? It isn’t simply a reminder
to look after immigrants, legal or illegal, children growing up without family security and care, or women struggling on their own to make ends meet. That’s all in those verses, of course. But that’s not what strikes me. What strikes me is the vision of social order that’s behind those commandments; the society, the culture, that’s envisaged and makes such demands upon the members of its community.

What is this Biblical vision? It’s of life lived under divine justice; a righteous order of things that is written into creation by its uncreated creator. This is an order that is generous, loving and merciful. And that generosity, love and mercy goes all the way down so that human beings are informed by it and act in accordance with it. St. Augustine called this the ordo amoris – the ordering of love – and what it produces is a compassionate society: people who can feel what alienation is all about because they have experienced alienation themselves; who can empathize with the suffering of others less able than themselves because they know something of what suffering is; who know, emotionally, the embarrassment of their own riches in the face of another’s destitution. It’s a divine order that gets translated into a social order, and as a social order it gets institutionalized. As this week we celebrated the National Health Service I cannot but sense that here is one instance of the way a public body institutionalizes a social and common good that is consonant with a divine good willing that all things created flourish; and flourish together. Education is another social and common good. It should be open to all and offer excellence to all. The university here is working on that; the Colleges too are working on that. Until there is open access then privilege cultivates further privilege, and on all accounts (social and economic) the trickle down effect doesn’t happen; hasn’t happened – because individuals take care of their own. They find it difficult to accept that all things belong to God; that we are only stewards of the gifts given to us – the gifts given that they might be bestowed upon all. “What have you received,” St. Paul asks the Corinthians, “that you were not given?”

The injunctions of Deuteronomy offer us a picture of the kingdom of heaven; life lived as God intends it. It’s a life without fear – fear of the stranger, fear of poverty, fear of insecurity. It’s a picture of a people free from the greeds, self-defensiveness and rampant acquisitiveness that sin engenders. This is a people who know they have been saved and what they have been saved from: slavery in Egypt; slavery to their own consumptive desires. It is Augustine’s ordo amoris – the righteous order of love – that Christ came to inaugurate. This is a picture of how church should be as the body of Christ. It’s the realization of that ethical way of living spoken of by Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount.
It’s life lived according to the way the uncreated creator fashioned life; and it fashions us, we who long to live the life of God, we whose lives, as St. Paul tells us, are hidden with Christ in God.

That is important for our understanding as Christians of what salvation means. We are saved individually to work in the kingdom of God; to work for the kingdom of God – for that justice, generosity, mercy and love that are the outworking of the kingdom for the common good. All things are reconciled in Christ, in heaven and earth – we’re told. But that salvation has to be worked out in and through you and me. And what that means is that my salvation or your salvation is not enough. While there remains one stranger who is not welcomed, one orphan who is not cared for, one widow who lives in destitution, then we are not fully redeemed because the world is not fully redeemed. We are not fully redeemed until the wars cease and the hungry get fed; until our willful exploitation of creation’s goods is nurtured with respect, and all things are reconciled.

That is hard. Not because it can’t be achieved. It is hard because we can’t even imagine it. We see, instead, the million and one difficulties that prevent even trying to achieve it. But there it is: God’s justice, mercy and love that changes hearts of stone into hearts of palpable and feeling flesh. It will never be, and cannot be, a purely human achievement; the impossible is only made possible in Christ. But the vision of what could be, should be and will be remains. The vision is political as it’s also social, and it presses in upon us as a hope beyond hope. In that passage from the Book of Deuteronomy it’s commanded that we live it out. Somehow. In God’s strength. And without a vision the people perish.