

Sermon for Evensong on the First Sunday after the Epiphany, 7th January 2018

Isaiah 42:1-9, Ephesians 2:1-10: Trump/Bayes

Paul Bayes, the Bishop of Liverpool, hit the headlines the other day by suggesting that Americans who go to church, but who also support the policies of President Trump, are not really Christians. Or, shall we say, by supporting Trump, they are acting in a way which conflicts with true Christian belief.

He doesn't see how you can square professing to be a Christian with supporting Donald Trump, in that Donald Trump has shown that he is a womaniser, a xenophobe, a racist and a warmonger. If Christians support Donald Trump, does that in any way compromise their Christianity? The Bishop of Liverpool clearly says, 'Yes, it does.'

Instead of the President, look for a minute at the leader whom Isaiah was describing in our first Bible reading. This is sometimes called the Song of the Covenant. It is a proclamation, through the mouth of the prophet Isaiah, putting God's words into the mouth of the prophet, describing that chosen leader, the Messiah, leading the people bound by their agreement with God, the covenant with Abraham: 'He shall not cry, nor lift up, nor cause his voice to be heard in the street.' He is gentle. 'A bruised reed shall he not break'. Strangely, you might feel, there's no mention of Twitter.

But interestingly - perhaps a bit paradoxically - this is all in a series of chapters describing God reaching an agreement, a covenant, with his chosen people - it's not just an agreement between God and the chosen people, the Israelites. Even back in the beginning, in the Old Testament, in Isaiah it says, '... he shall bring forth judgment to the Gentiles' and 'I the Lord have called thee in righteousness, and will hold thine hand, and will keep thee, and give thee for a covenant of the people, for a light of the Gentiles'. A light of the Gentiles - the Gentiles were the non-Jews. They were what we are.

So right at the beginning, at the championing of the people of Israel in God's eyes, there was also more than a look over the shoulder at the people who were not Jewish. The Messiah was going to be a light to them too, a 'light to the Gentiles'. This is universal. Christ is for all the world, for everyone.

The idea of a private understanding, a covenant, between God and his 'chosen people' may seem a bit strange to us now. But in the Methodist Church all over the world this Sunday, the first Sunday of the year, is known

as Covenant Sunday, and there is a special service in which the congregation renew their commitment to follow God's commandments, and John Wesley's special Covenant prayer is said. I will pray that prayer for us when I lead our prayers in a few minutes.

What the Messiah was going to do had a distinctly revolutionary aspect to it. He would bring the prisoners out of prison and give light to the blind, in a society where, if you were disabled, people thought that was because you had done something wrong and were bad in some way. So in other words the people who had the deal with the Almighty, the chosen, the chosen race, the Israelites, were not chosen so that they could carry all before them and rule the world, they were to be a haven of social justice and reconciliation, where the leader was not a mighty warrior but was a gentle person who would not hurt a fly. Rather different from President Trump.

People who are politically savvy will probably glaze over a bit as I go through this because, they will say, 'What is the relevance of what happened 2000 years ago - or even earlier, if you are talking about Isaiah?' There are practical things that you just can't ignore. 'It's the economy, stupid.' I mean, in this country these days, even if in an ideal world we would like to, we just don't have the money to do all the good things that we would like to do.'

But it is notable that in the Bible there is never any reference to what doing the right thing might cost. It's just a question whether it's the right thing to do or not. St Paul's point in our second lesson from Ephesians is that, given that the Messiah has come, that Jesus has appeared, and in so doing God has renewed his covenant; so there is an effect on the faithful believers. Once they realise that God has taken an interest in them, then, the argument goes, they won't want to do any bad things in future. It won't matter what the practicalities are: 'Teach us, good Lord to give, and not to count the cost'. That will be their guiding principle.

But whereas perhaps even in the light of this, all we can do about the godlessness of President Trump is to sigh, and say how much we disapprove, what about things nearer to home? For instance, what about the leader of Windsor borough council?

The leader of the Windsor council has written to the police and crime commissioner local to him, to ask that homeless people be cleared off the streets in time for Prince Harry and Meghan Markle's wedding. Now is there any kind of conflict between the Christianity of the wedding and the unsympathetic attitude to homeless people exhibited by the council leader? He has said that he just wanted to do something to help the wedding couple. He has said that he thought that many of the homeless people were not really

homeless, because there were places where they could stay. They were begging, making themselves a nuisance.

But what would Jesus say about that? Or indeed Isaiah? The Old Testament has numerous places where the prophets tell people to look after widows and orphans, and 'the stranger that is in your midst'. That must imply that they are homeless. And in the New Testament, in Jesus' own words, what about the Great Judgement in Matthew 25:

Then shall the King say unto them on his right hand, Come, ye blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world: For I was an hungred, and ye gave me meat: I was thirsty, and ye gave me drink: I was a stranger, and ye took me in:

Naked, and ye clothed me: I was sick, and ye visited me: I was in prison, and ye came unto me.

Then shall the righteous answer him, saying, Lord, when saw we thee an hungred, and fed thee? or thirsty, and gave thee drink?

When saw we thee a stranger, and took thee in? or naked, and clothed thee?

Or when saw we thee sick, or in prison, and came unto thee?

And the King shall answer and say unto them, Verily I say unto you, Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me.

I would suggest that it's pretty clear that Jesus wouldn't be sympathetic to the leader of Windsor borough council. I think Jesus would say that it doesn't matter why someone is homeless, or a beggar. The Good Samaritan didn't check to see whether the man who had been hurt had in some way been responsible for his plight, to blame for it, had somehow brought his misfortune on himself.

And indeed many of the organisations which work to care for the homeless have challenged the council leader's reasoning. Thames Valley Police, the ones he asked to clear so-called 'rough sleepers' off the streets, didn't think that would help. It would be more effective, the police said, if the causes of homelessness and destitution were addressed instead. Crisis, the charity for the homeless, said similar things. People don't choose to be homeless, and they only beg when they are desperate. Shelter and Centrepoint, two other leading charities, have agreed.

I don't know whether the leader of Windsor and Maidenhead Royal Borough Council goes to church at all. But I think that if he does, he ought to reflect very carefully on what the Bishop of Liverpool has said about whether it's possible to be a Trump supporter and a Christian at the same time. It applies here on this side of the Atlantic too. If you don't love your neighbour as yourself, never mind what it costs, you're not a real Christian.

Amen.

Hugh Bryant

The Covenant Prayer of John Wesley (1703–1791)

I am no longer my own, but thine.
Put me to what thou wilt, rank me with whom thou wilt.
Put me to doing, put me to suffering.
Let me be employed for thee or laid aside for thee,
exalted for thee or brought low for thee.
Let me be full, let me be empty.
Let me have all things, let me have nothing.
I freely and heartily yield all things to thy pleasure and disposal.
And now, O glorious and blessed God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit,
thou art mine, and I am thine.
So be it.
And the covenant which I have made on earth,
let it be ratified in heaven.
Amen.

Further Bible references: see
http://www.thinkingfaith.org/articles/20110203_1.htm