

KCM Potters Bar – Dedication Festival – Sunday 9 July 2017

Preached by the Very Reverend Dr. Jeffrey John, Dean of St Albans

I have a friend who is Vicar of a very pretty, stockbroker sort of village in Southern England. He was doing very well until one day the news came that the Prison Service wanted to build a rehabilitation centre for young offenders in his parish. My friend the Vicar, who is a socially-minded sort of clergyman, but a bit naïve, was pleased. He thought this was a great ‘mission opportunity’ for his wealthy parish to help some young people with far fewer chances. He expressed a warm welcome for the plan.

Most of his PCC, though, didn’t see it that way. Half of them joined a local campaign to stop the centre coming. They thought about the danger, all the possible threats to their children and homes and property values. When the Vicar came out in favour of the rehabilitation centre, some saw him as a traitor. One or two stopped coming to church, and a few more cold-shouldered him. He is still in the same parish. But he’s pretty bruised, has lost heart, and he’s afraid he’s now a marked man, and the Bishop thinks he’s a troublemaker.

Well, as I say, he was always naïve; and I expect he could have handled the situation more diplomatically. Nevertheless his basic instinct was, I think, the Christian one. He felt his parishioners were being unchristian, and said so. So he’s paying the price.

Jesus often warned the disciples that they would probably be hated and persecuted if they stood up for him before the world. But it is not only before the world. He warns in today’s Gospel it can be even harder to stand up for what you think is right among the people you are closest to: ‘A prophet is not without honour, except in his own house and his own family’. And he might have added ‘in his own church too’.

We need the Church; we give thanks for the Church. We are giving thanks for this one today. But what about the times when, like my Vicar friend, you feel you have to witness as a Christian, not against the world, but against the Church itself? What do you do when your own Christian conscience tells you one thing, but your Church is saying something else?

At the end of this month the Church keeps a feast day in honour of William Wilberforce. Wilberforce is a very good example of this dilemma.

Everybody now thinks of Wilberforce as a great Christian hero, battling to free the slaves in the name of Christ. And so of course he was. But we forget that Wilberforce’s fiercest opponents were Christians too; and when he began they were very much the majority.

The Christian opponents of Wilberforce pointed out that slavery is accepted as normal throughout the Bible. They quoted St Paul telling slaves to be obedient to their masters. They pointed out that Paul actually sent one runaway slave back to his owner, Philemon.

Hardly anybody in eighteen centuries of the Church's existence ever suggested slavery was wrong. It was Wilberforce's Christian opponents who had the bible and church and tradition on their side. They accused Wilberforce of being not just liberal, but unchristian and 'unbiblical', as well. And the people who opposed Wilberforce's emancipation bill more determinedly than anyone else, and managed to delay it for ten years in Parliament, were the Bishops of the Church of England, many of whom were slave owners themselves.

Isn't it odd how the Church has forgotten that?

Something else we have forgotten is how pathetic nearly all the churches in Germany were in standing up to Hitler – both Catholic and Protestant. There were a few heroes like Maximilian Kolbe, and Dietrich Bonhoeffer. But they were very few indeed, and they had precious little support from their fellow Christians.

The fact is that the overwhelming majority of the German Church went along with the Nazis; and, as Himmler once pointed out, that wasn't surprising, since the Church invented anti-Semitism in the first place.

Nazi Christians pointed out that in the Gospel the Jews are cursed for having killed Jesus. Hitler himself often quoted Martin Luther in his speeches – because Luther had also preached that Germany should get rid of the Jews, and should burn down their houses and schools and synagogues, and kick them out of the country in the name of Jesus Christ.... This year we are meant to be celebrating Martin Luther's 500th anniversary, but nobody ever mentions that fact about him, do they?

Isn't it odd how the Church has forgotten that?

It is painful to admit, but we do need to see clearly that to be a true witness to Christ doesn't only mean standing up to the world. Sometimes it means standing up to the Church as well.

And of course that is an awful position to be in. If you read the memoirs of Wilberforce and Bonhoeffer, what comes across all the time is an agony of self-questioning and self-doubt. How can I set myself up against what the majority of Christians have always believed? How can I dare oppose the weight of Bible and tradition, when everyone is so sure they know what they mean? Is this really God speaking to my conscience or is it just wilful pride? Shouldn't I just obey, and submit to what other Christians think?

Well, thank God, Wilberforce and Bonhoeffer and many others didn't just submit to what other Christians thought. They *did* follow their conscience, and now, with the benefit of

hindsight, the Church calls them saints and Christian heroes. But it is worth asking whether we would have agreed with them if we had been around then – because the chances are we wouldn't.

One of the reasons I wish Anglicans studied more Bible and Christian history is that when you do study them, you realise that, far from being unchanging, religious ideas have constantly changed and developed. And the main way they have changed and developed is that in every age there have been people in the Church who stuck their necks out and said, 'What we are doing is wrong and unjust. It must change'.

Usually, like Wilberforce and Bonhoeffer, they get squashed by the Church at the time and are only recognised later on, when they are safely dead. Prophets are without honour in their own land – and usually in their own time as well.

One of my favourite saints is a Greek Orthodox saint called Saint Simeon the New Theologian. He's not actually very new, he is from the tenth century, but in Orthodoxy of course that IS relatively new. The Eastern Orthodox in particular always tend to think of their faith as an unchanging tradition. But as St Simeon pointed out, it isn't true. On the contrary, he said, the test of real orthodoxy and healthy tradition is that *it trains its own critics*. There always has to be dialogue and challenge within the Church, so that it can adapt to new circumstances and new knowledge; otherwise it becomes irrelevant or corrupt or both. (St Simeon of course was also condemned as a dangerous liberal. They only made him a saint long after he was safely dead.)

But he was right. Christians have to be critics as well as disciples. We are not called to blind obedience. Jesus call us friends, not slaves, and in the end we have to follow our own conscience in the light of his Spirit. Most of the time, if we are called to stick out our necks and witness, it will be a challenge to the world. But sometimes – like Wilberforce and Bonhoeffer – we have to stick out our necks and challenge the Church too – because that's the only way the Church itself can learn and grow.

One sharp observer put it like this:

The Church always goes through four stages of response to any challenge to its tradition. First it pretends the challenge isn't there. Then it argues vehemently against it and tries to exclude the challengers. Then it starts to admit exceptions and qualifications. Last of all, it insists that's what it *really* thought all along....