

Haileybury School – Commemoration Service – 10.00 – 25.5.13

Isaiah 65:17 See, I will create a new heaven and a new earth.

See I will create a new heaven and a new earth.

What is the good society?

It was the hands that affected me most! It could have been the photos and the stories of the people they depicted. It could have been their letters, some of them etched in their own blood for there was no ink, or the railway carriage in which they were incarcerated for the lengthy and inhuman journey to that place. But it was the hands that affected me.

Where are the hands? They are, as one or two of you will know, at the ALZHIR museum which lies 37 kilometres outside Astana, the capital of Kazakhstan – a museum that stands on the site of the Akolminsky Gulag to which Stalin dispatched the wives, sisters and daughters of the ‘enemies of the motherland’.

Why the hands? In the museum which I have visited twice there is the mock-up of a cell complete with wooden door; the door surrounded on all sides by a metal grill to which these replica hands are attached – clinging, gripping, yearning; hands that speak of both the evil of that place and the regime that imprisoned them, of hopelessness and lost-ness; but also of a seeking for freedom, for a transfigured order.

A place with those hands that reminds not just the Kazakhs – that country this school has partnered in education – but all us of enduring human spirit; but also the depths to which human community can sink. The ‘all too often’ propensity to lose our way.

What is the good society?

I ask that question because in so many ways the answer seems elusive. The financial crisis of recent years for instance not only showed up the deficiencies of our banking system, but exposed our loss of vision for healthy society. Whether it was the pride that drove our thirst for unlimited growth and convinced us that we were masters of the universe; or the loss of concern for neighbour that exploited the poor, an absence of overriding vision of the good was laid bare. Or more recently the evidence of deepening fractures in society that our current age of austerity so easily fosters – there is a proper reform agenda for welfare but that is no excuse for scapegoating the vulnerable.

I ask that question because in so many ways we have lost the art of speaking of the good. Our post-modern age with its fear of overarching story runs away from shared vision and shared values. For three years I was part of a Commission on the future of civil society with colleagues who were passionate in their commitment to strong community, but yet really struggled to put into writing any reference to shared values for fear they seemed prescriptive.

I ask that question because it is a good question for a commemoration day when we look back with thanks to those who have had vision for this nation and beyond; when we celebrate the gifts of this present age and the values of this school; when those of

you in the sixth form in particular go forward to make your contribution to our common good.

What is the good society?

I ask that question because in a world where so often humanity loses its way; where the hands of God's people yearn and cry for release, for a new order, we are not bereft of vision; the vision of our creator for his creation. Look again at our readings.

Firstly from Isaiah words to the people of Israel who had returned from exile in Babylon; a community that was reconstructing itself alongside the reconstruction of the Temple. It is the prophet speaking to a people who had literally been dislocated from their context by the trauma of displacement, and who were now rebuilding their lives; the prophet holding before them a holy vision of what should be – the good society where young and old flourish; where exploitation and abuse of the poor is no more; where all can contribute; where old enmities are healed. It is a community that will be marked by delight and joy.

See I will create a new heaven and a new earth - not just the prophecy of Isaiah but the promise of Revelation. A new order in which creation is transfigured and God takes his place at its heart.

What is the good society?

It is when all of us have the courage to hold before us that greater vision – to see beyond our lost-ness and know the transfiguring promise of God. The Scottish poet Edwin Muir in his poem *The Transfiguration* in which he imagines himself as one of the disciples present when Jesus was transfigured on the mountain top describes

society made new – of everything ‘in its place’: Part of it goes like this:

*And when we went into the town, he with us,
The lurkers under doorways, murderers,
With rags tied round their feet for silence, came
Out of themselves to us and were with us,
And those who hide within the labyrinth
Of their own loneliness and greatness came,
And those entangled in their own devices,
The silent and the garrulous liars, all
Stepped out of their dungeons and were free.*

Good society holds before itself that vision of all things made new.

What is good society?

It is when we have the courage to live that greater vision of heaven on earth – to be ourselves signs of what should be; what can be.

Seventy or so years ago in the deepening division of South Africa a white man in a big black hat and white flowing cassock swept down the street of the town where a young black boy lived. In his words *you could have knocked me down with a feather ... He doffed his hat to my mother ... it was almost mind-boggling that a white man could doff his hat to my mother, a black woman, really a non-entity in South Africa's terms.*

The young boy was Desmond Tutu who caught that vision of how things could be different. The man – well Tutu is clear – even though there is an inconsistency with dates - that it was Trevor Huddleston who in so many ways challenged the distorted vision of reality that

was apartheid; Trevor Huddleston who one hundred years ago next month was born in Bedford. Good Society is people of holy vision doing holy things.

What is good society?

It is when that vision of all things made new confronts us, changes us, makes us.

Last weekend I spent time in Luton – part of my patch – listening to leaders in the Black Community. As you may know there has been a disturbing increase in gun crime, ten shootings this year, some of it turf wars between rival gangs who I am told seek to emulate the gang culture of South London. One of the images used in our discussion was that of ‘who owns the streets’ not least because it had been reported that the young men involved had claimed that they were in charge – and no doubt at times it felt like that – but at the very least it is a frightening thought.

Over against this the Black Pastor and the leader of the Non Violence Alliance, also Caribbean, spoke of their passion for the streets to be reclaimed by the people; by the community. And what drove this passion – not a secular creed; or a political manifesto but a Gospel vision of God’s society. Indeed we talked of Isaiah 65 – our reading – not as some utopian dream or romantic picture of heaven, but as the agenda for earth – a new earth amidst the reality of bullets, woundings and death.

In a world where the hands of the oppressed and the lost reach out for something new we must speak with confidence of the good.

What is good society?

In Astana the capital of Kazakhstan and home of Haileybury Astana there are many remarkable new buildings not least the Pyramid of Peace. A 62 metre square glass pyramid it was built a place of peace, harmony and accord, especially between the religions of the world. It is to that Pyramid I have gone on several occasions, not least as a delegate to two Congresses of World and Traditional Religions.

In stark contrast to the hands of those imprisoned by terror at ALZHIR the pyramid is a place of meeting, not least as people from across the world faiths share their visions of creation renewed – symbolised particularly by the doves etched into the glass at the very pinnacle of the pyramid.

Two buildings – one speaking of human despair and lost-ness; the other of human hope; of a new heaven and a new earth. Together calling us to have that courage to receive God’s vision for his people; to proclaim that vision; to live that vision.

What is good society?

It is God’s call to each one of us – not least those of you preparing to move on from this school – to play your part in making all things new; just as many of your predecessors have done.

See I will create a new heaven and a new earth.