

Malton Priory – Civic Service – 6.30 pm – 18.4.13

Deut 31:6 Be strong and courageous. Do not be afraid or terrified because of them, for the Lord your God goes with you; he will never leave you nor forsake you.

Do not be afraid ... for the Lord your God goes with you

There they are. Almost there! On the cusp of crossing the Jordan to inherit the land that God had promised them. After all those years of testing and travelling through the wilderness; after their escape from their captivity in Egypt the people of Israel are about to enter the land that God had promised.

In the account of God's people that is the Old Testament it is a defining moment. For us it is not just a reading of divine history but a paradigm of how God always leads us forward into his promises; God's invitation to travel forward with courage and faith.

Do not be afraid ... for the Lord your God goes with you

When your Mayor, Jason, kindly gave me the honour of preaching at this service he told me that the theme was faith and courage and invited me to choose the readings. My mind went immediately to that Old Testament passage from Deuteronomy; to what it meant when I heard it seven years ago in India.

I was in south-eastern Gujarat as part of a sabbatical visit and travelled with the Bishop to one of the tribal areas – the Adivasi peoples who in this case had become Christians a generation or two before. The Bishop had been anxious about taking me into what was a troubled area; troubled because that coming weekend a great festival, a huge mela was planned by their Hindu neighbours and there was the fear that it would end in violence.

It was no abstract fear for some years earlier a similar festival had been held, violence had ensued, people had been hurt and churches had been burnt down. There was a palpable fear among the Christians we went to meet, many of whom remembered those previous events and carried the scars. Thankfully there aren't many church meetings I go to where the agenda is the booking of ambulances in case people are hurt and finding lawyers to take action if property is damaged. Or is Church life different up here!

Into that fear the Bishop used the passage we have tonight. As the Bible tells us repeatedly – eighty-one times in fact – he told them 'Do not be afraid'. I recall him emphasising that message again and again. And yet there was still hesitation – one or two people asked whether they should prepare to defend themselves. That was until the person next to me stood up. He spoke of his fear – he had been beaten up that previous time; he remembered church buildings on fire – but then he spoke not of meeting violence with violence, but of a different weapon. He spoke of his trust, his faith in God who was

always with him and before him. And the mood changed. There was courage in those people – but there was also faith – the faith that where-ever they went God went with them; went before them.

Thankfully the festival passed off reasonably peacefully but it was a powerful moment.

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It is the same invitation to courage and faith that we see in Jesus' call to Peter in our New Testament lesson; to leave the boat and come to him across the water. Focus I suggest on what this story represents – the call to step out from the maelstrom of the storm – the boat we are told was *buffeted by the waves because the wind was against it* – to step out into the promise of stability and safety that Jesus offers.

Take courage, says Jesus, don't be afraid – and initially Peter is confident but then his courage falters; his faith in the invitation to travel forward is weakened; and he begins to sink back into the stormy waters.

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This is too much for Peter and Jesus has to reach out and save him.

So what is God saying to us tonight? What is God saying to all of you who in different ways are involved in this community

and its civic life? And that is all of us – not just elected representatives – we are all citizens called to play our part.

I suggest that both our passages have something important to say.

Civic life at its heart is a call to build the ‘good’ society – not some utopia that romanticizes life or in which we gain at the expense of others; but the ‘good’ society in which God given values of justice, righteousness, care of neighbour, concern for the weak, the flourishing of our humanity – in which the gifts of the Spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness and more – are its character and quality.

It is the call before us; like those Israelites on the bank of the Jordan, the question is do we have the courage and the faith to travel forward into God’s promise.

For we must not delude ourselves that this is an easy journey! For instance the facts of the financial crisis over the last five years have shown us how easy it is to be caught up in distorted priorities, not least the illusion that as human beings we are masters of the universe and that there are no constraints on what we can seek in financial growth. We now know too well the cost of that on us all not least the poorest.

To stand up for the common good; to serve the whole community; to seek the flourishing of all demands courage; it demands faith. Courage to speak up and speak out; faith to trust the God who goes before us.

Our New Testament Reading is saying something very similar. For none of us are immune – even Town Councils – from that sense of being in the midst of a storm; of being buffeted on every side by the winds of community and political life. But frightening as it can be, the temptation is always to cower in the boat when the invitation is to be brave and to step out – to step out with the courage and faith that those values that God gives us, not least in the living, obedient, sacrificial, cross centred example of his son Jesus Christ, are not just matters for interesting debate, but for courageous leadership and championing. God invites us into his promise – with courage and faith to serve the ‘good’.

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In the centre of Bedford there are two adjacent statues. The first – the more obvious and dominant – is one of those civic adventures into art that divide opinion. Called *Two silver faces* it is just that – two huge reflective silver mask like faces staring at each other which the artist Rick Kirby says speak of harmony in the midst of the diversity of the town. It recently topped a poll for the most unloved structure in the town.

Behind it is another – much smaller – statue. It is the bust of Archbishop Trevor Huddleston, who for a number of years ministered in the townships of South Africa as the Apartheid regime developed and grew in the post war period. In particular he resisted and spoke out against the destruction of the township of Sophiatown. He is also well-known as the

white man who tipped his cap to an uneducated black woman – an action that deeply moved his son; a son who was also visited regularly in hospital when he had TB; boy who grew up to be Desmond Tutu.

This smaller statue is there because Trevor Huddleston was born in the town – on June 13th this year it will be the centenary of his birth; the centenary of the birth of someone who knew what it was to respond to God's call to step out with courage and faith, for the common good. A priest who resisted the oppression and apartheid; who took brave decisions to oppose it; and who held before the world a vision of what God requires of us.

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Robert Kirby's *Two Silver Faces* was installed by the council about five years ago in a prominent place on the High Street in Bedford. To achieve that, the statue of Trevor Huddleston was moved to a less prominent place.

It takes courage and its take faith to speak up for the 'good'; to speak out for the values of God and his kingdom; - all too often the pressure is on to move to a less prominent place. We are called to emulate the courage and faith of people like Huddleston; not to just glitter and shine on the high street.

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