

Sermon for Evensong on the 10th Sunday after Trinity, 20th August 2017

2 Kings 4:1-37; Psalm 90; Acts 16:1-15 *Nigra sum*

'Thou turnest man to destruction: again thou sayest, Come again, ye children of men'. That's what we've just sung, in Psalm 90. It means, return to the dust, out of which you were made. Psalm 90 is sometimes used at funerals, and describes the insignificance and fleeting existence of human life when compared with the creative - and destructive - power of God.

There's a powerful novel by P. D. James called 'Children of Men'. It's a dystopian vision of the future - just as 1984 suddenly wasn't in the distant future, in this case, the future is 2021 - not long now.

Gradually, no more children are being born. The human race is dying out. Then, years after the last person was born, a woman becomes pregnant. Now read on! I won't spoil it for you. There's a film of it too, which is also good, but rather different.

One little switch. No more babies. And that's it for the human race. It's perhaps more frightening, as being rather more mundane, more feasible, in a way, than a nuclear holocaust.

There has been a school of thought - perhaps as a result of too much reading of the Old Testament - that if God does take steps against mankind, it must be to punish them for something they've done wrong.

So now, for people who think in that way, it will be likely to be rather a worrying time. We have the President of the USA completely failing to condemn white supremacists and Nazis - saying there are 'some very good people' among them; in this country, all of sudden, it's not beyond the pale for people openly to want to shut out from this country anyone who isn't a white, English-speaking person with useful skills and plenty of money.

Nearer to home, did anyone even think for a minute whether it was right to chase away the travellers, the gypsies, who came and camped out on the Leg O'Mutton field in Cobham? Remember, Hitler exterminated Gypsies as well as Jews. How should we treat them? What would Jesus have said?

Now again, instead of seeking closer union with our neighbours in Europe, we have set our faces against them with the vote for so-called 'Brexit'. 'Sovereignty', whatever that means, is supposed to be more important than the brotherhood of man.

I think that Emily Thornberry was right, although she got into hot water for saying it, about the house with a white van parked in the drive, festooned with English flags. That flag is not benign: it is meant to say, 'England alone!' Go away, everyone else. Black, brown, foreign people: go away from our 'crowded' island. The crowds are, I would suggest, a myth. There is plenty of room in the UK. The hidden, evil message is that there are too many of the 'wrong sort of person' - people who are not like us.

I still remember the first time I went to Bombay - the first time I went to India - and walked down the street. I was the only white man. The only white man among thousands of brown and black faces. I began to imagine what it must feel like to be a black person in England sometimes. No wonder that black people may congregate in places where there are already significant numbers of black people. We have a certain innate small-c conservatism, all of us, I think, which makes us easier with people whom we know.

Obviously in a country of nearly 70 million people, we can't know everyone, so I suspect that we fall back on what people look like. If they look like us, fine. If not, there might be a reservation, a hesitation, a query in our minds.

This isn't good. Xenophobia, racism, white supremacy. No thought for the idea that we are all equally God's creatures, God's children. God, if He cares about us in the way the Old Testament describes, might well send some plagues down on us for being so awful.

Yet so far as I know, God hasn't worked that way recently. Taken as a whole in the Bible, in contrast with the various chastisements in the Old Testament - and Psalm 90 is said to be a Psalm of Moses, inspired by the complaining of the Israelites in the desert - there are many stories of healing and salvation.

Elisha's two miracles described in our first lesson are cases in point. The first one is a sort of self-help example with a miraculous element, a bit like feeding the 5,000, in that the oil never ran out, and the resurrection of the Shunammite woman's daughter is like the raising of Lazarus or the resurrection of Jairus' daughter - 'damsel, arise' - in the New Testament.

We don't know how these miracles worked - or else they wouldn't be miraculous. Maybe these stories are just mythical. It's striking how similar the miracles done by Elisha are, in these two cases at least, to Jesus' miracles.

The 'rose of Sharon', the beautiful girl, in the Song of Solomon, 'nigra sum sed pulchra,' in the Latin words of the beautiful canticle in Monteverdi's Vespers, is said to be a 'Shulamite', or a Shunammite. Perhaps there's a link with the 'great woman' in our lesson from 2 Kings. She was kind to the man of God, Elisha, and 'constrained him' to eat bread. It's a bit reminiscent of Mrs

Doyle, Father Ted's housekeeper, pressing ever more cake and sandwiches on her hapless priestly charges: 'Oh, go on, go on, go on ...!' Maybe she was Abishag, the most beautiful woman in Israel, who went to comfort King David in his old age - she too came from Shunem.

But even in the beauty of Monteverdi there's a wrong note. 'Nigra sum sed pulchra' sings the girl - although often, for mysterious musical reasons, it's actually a male counter-tenor singing - meaning, 'I am black but beautiful'. To sing 'but' beautiful is awful - but in 1610, when the Vespers was written, that kind of casual racism was unfortunately there. I feel that if we can change the words of the Lord's Prayer so that we 'forgive those who' trespass against us, instead of 'them that' do it, we could change 'nigra sum, sed' (black, but ...) to 'nigra sum et pulchra'. 'And' beautiful. Perhaps you, Robert [*Prof. Robert Woolley, Director of Music at St Mary's*], could speak to Harry Christophers or Sir John Eliot Gardner about it.

The disciples with St Paul - (including St Luke, who most likely was the author of the Acts of the Apostles as well, and who was an eyewitness with the Apostles, at least for some of the time, which we think partly because of the passage which was our lesson tonight, in their journey, where it says, 'We': 'We came with a straight course to Samothracia', and so on) - well, he and the disciples went to pray, not just in the synagogues, but in Philippi they went to a part of the river bank, where people went to pray; actually, not just any 'people' went there, but a group of women. And there they met and got to know Lydia, who, like the Shunammite woman with the man of God, Elisha, invited them to stay with her. She 'constrained them' too; she was another Mrs Doyle!

Shunammite women, blacks, and the women worshipping with Lydia on the river bank: all a bit different, according to the lights of the time then; but all variously blessed. To be with Elisha, and with the apostles - and of course, with Jesus - we should be celebrating diversity and welcoming the people who are shut out - shut out by polite society, but also because they are black or strangers or refugees. Let us not shelter behind false distinctions between 'genuine' refugees and 'economic migrants'. Whatever they are, they are here; they are human beings like us; they're just as good as us; and if they are refugees, they need our welcome, our love, and our help. 'Come again, ye children of men.'

Amen.

Hugh Bryant