

Sermon for Evensong on the Twentieth Sunday after Trinity, 29th October 2017

Ecclesiastes 11 and 12; 2 Timothy 2:1-7 - see <http://bible.oremus.org/?ql=375963679> for the readings

John Simpson, the famous BBC war reporter and foreign correspondent, send out a Tweet earlier this week as follows: –

‘MP wants details of anti-Brexit univ[ersity] teachers. Decent folk deported on technicalities. Daily hate in press. Doesn't feel like my country now.’

You will remember that, on Twitter, everything has to be distilled down into 140 characters or less. You get these short pithy sentences.

It reminded me that I have a dear friend that I regret to say I haven't spoken to for several months. But I see something of him, because, like John Simpson, and, dare I say, like me, he uses Twitter. Oh - I suppose there is an elephant in the room. Another famous person who uses Twitter - ah, yes: Pres. Trump. The less said about that the better, I think.

The problem so far as I and my friend are concerned, (and this is somebody whom I met in the very first week of my very first term at university, so is a very close friend) is that he is in favour of Brexit. I am, as everybody knows, sure that Brexit is an awful catastrophe for our country in all sorts of ways.

Ah! [Said in the manner of Luca Zingaretti in ‘Montalbano’, passim]. Ah! But you will be relieved to know, this is a sermon and not a political speech. We're not going to discuss the relative merits of the cases for and against leaving the European Union. What we are going to talk about is what John Simpson is alluding to, that our world does not feel very nice at present. The problem with the difference in views between me and my friend is that it has stopped us talking to each other - and enjoying music together and generally being good friends. John Simpson goes on in another Tweet to say that what upsets him is not the merits or otherwise of Brexit or some other political question, but what he describes as ‘the current viciousness in British public life.’ It's all about how we cope with disagreements.

My friend Tweets passionately in favour of Brexit and he makes rude remarks about people he calls ‘remoaners’ [sic]. I retaliate, I am ashamed to say, with a homophone pejorative epithet for those in favour of leaving the European Union - you know, which rhymes with ‘Brexit’. The problem is that we are both passionate, and I think that I would accept that my friend not only feels passionately that it is important to leave the EU, that it is vital to the

flourishing and well being of our nation as a whole: he feels that if we don't do it, we will be ruined; I feel the exact opposite. I feel passionate. I feel that it is terribly important. We are walking over a cliff, I feel. We are moving inexorably towards a catastrophe.

I am, really, really not going to talk about the merits of the actual dispute. But what I am worried about is the fact that we have such a bitter dispute and that the general climate, as John Simpson suggests, is that our world is becoming one of bitterness and a tendency towards extremely negative views, even hate speech. Some people indeed say that this is whipped up by some of the newspapers.

The 'Preacher', so-called Ecclesiastes, whom some people call the 'Speaker', would tend to discourage all this passion. [12.8] 'Vanity of vanities, saith the preacher; all is vanity.'

'Emptiness, emptiness, says the Speaker, emptiness, all is empty. What does man gain from all his labour and his toil here under the sun?... What has happened will happen again, and what has been done will be done again, and there is nothing new under the sun.' (Eccl.1:2 and 9, NEB). Why would you bother? Que sera sera. What is going to happen, will happen. There's nothing anyone can do to change it.

Within our church, although not necessarily within this particular congregation, but within the Church of England in general, there are very sharp divisions, in the area of sexuality for example, both regarding so-called gay marriage and also, still, concerning whether there can be female priests. What is the Christian response? What should Christians do when we catch ourselves in disagreement with each other? When we both think that we are right and moreover, when we think that the thing that we are right about is of really paramount importance?

It's not 'vanity of vanities', not something that you can just take or leave. Jesus seemed to think that he himself, in his own message and preaching, would not necessarily always bring about serene contemplation and blissful agreement. You will remember that in the 10th chapter of St Matthew's Gospel, after he has sent out the 12 disciples on their mission to proclaim the gospel, the message that 'the kingdom of heaven is upon you', sending them out 'like sheep among wolves', he tells them how tough their job will be. They will be arrested and put on trial, disowned by erstwhile friends. Christianity will be controversial; it will set families against each other even inside themselves.

Our second lesson, from 2 Timothy, emphasises the quasi-military discipline which the true disciple needs, to avoid being put off or distracted from his

work on behalf of the Lord. 'Thou therefore endure hardness, as a good soldier of Jesus Christ. No man that warreth entangleth himself with the affairs of this life; that he may please him who hath chosen him to be a soldier.' No man that warreth; no man who goes to war, who becomes a soldier. He mustn't get tangled up in mundane stuff, minor domestic admin, instead of doing what he can to please, to obey, his superior officer.

Back to what Jesus said. 'You must not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I have not come to bring peace, but a sword. I have come to set a man against his father, a daughter against her mother, a young wife against her mother-in-law; a man will find his enemies under his own roof.'
(Matt.10:34)

And again I suppose that it is the same thing. Some people will be very sure that they are right about the kingdom of heaven and others will have their doubts. Where it gets in the way of loyalties to the state, as it did in Roman times, when Christians refused to worship the Emperor as a god, following Jesus, believing in God, it could even be lethal. It was so important: it was a matter of life and death, literally. An appointment with the lions in the arena.

More topically, this Tuesday, 31st October, will be the 500th anniversary of the date when Martin Luther is said to have nailed his list of differences or disputes with the Roman Catholic Church, his '95 Theses', to the door of the Castle Church in Wittenberg, Saxony - now part of Germany, and started the great division in the Western church between Catholics and Protestants. Another debate, another bitter division. The Reformation, as it was called, caused hundreds of people to be killed, burned at the stake. Arguably, Protestant and Catholic are only recently becoming friends again.

A world full of sharp disagreements, meannesses and doubts doesn't feel congenial. It doesn't feel like home, as John Simpson has said. But perhaps, despite saying he was bringing a sword, in fact Jesus wasn't encouraging people to disagree, but rather just describing how disagreements might arise, might just crop up, even in face of the Gospel message.

The message of Ecclesiastes is perhaps not just almost a nihilistic message: is he really saying, nothing has any worth: nothing matters: everything is vanity? Instead surely the Preacher, Ecclesiastes, is urging his listeners to have a proper respect for God as being unknowable: invisible: but 'God only wise'. So we should rein in our enthusiasm for certainty. Because none of us really knows.

So often, when we hit these seemingly impossible dilemmas, it's worth looking again at what Jesus said in the Sermon on the Mount. How about Matthew 5:25: 'Agree with thine adversary quickly, while thou art in the way

with him..' Because Jesus says that, otherwise, you might get bogged down in litigation - and you might even end up in prison! (Obviously as a lawyer, I couldn't possibly comment!) But think of the rest of the Sermon - turning the other cheek, going the extra mile. Even if you really disagree, it's better to be friends, and stop fighting.

So I think that Jesus' message is contrarian, as it often is. 'The first shall be last', and so on. Even if my friend is behaving like a complete idiot - or worse - we can, we must, agree, we must agree to differ. It's less important that one of us should win the argument than that we should agree to be friends.

I don't think Jesus, or Ecclesiastes, is telling us not to talk about things that divide us. There is a tendency just to avoid each other - which is what has happened so far, sadly, with my friend and me - but it would be much better if we can agree to engage, to talk, even if we both think the other one is completely wrong. There Ecclesiastes does offer something. When you cast your bread on the waters, who knows what you will get back?

You can't be sure, but I think it won't be too bad after all. It's worth a try. Do please pray for me - and I'll tell you how I get on.

Amen.

Hugh Bryant