STORMY WATERS
Eucharist, 24th February 2019


Introduction

Jesus’s stormy passage recalls another maritime adventure, when the sail training ship Malcolm Miller was crossing the North Sea from Norway. In a rising gale, she was making more than fifteen knots, with green seas washing the lee deck. It was exhilarating sailing for the 39 boys, as they learned to trust the ship, and to discover themselves.

When the sea darkened to windward, it was time to shorten sail, as a heavy squall approached. The Skipper said that it was too hazardous to send the trainees aloft. So, the Afterguard, - three watch officers and three watch leaders clawed their way up the windward shrouds, to the foremast cross-trees, to edge out onto the topsail yard, plunging seventy feet above the white-capped waves in the stinging rain. We balanced on the foot ropes, leaning over the yard, fighting the heavy canvas, to lash down the gaskets. We were glad to scramble down to the heaving deck, to receive grins from our watchs and the Skipper’s nod of approval. Galilean fishermen would have been proud of us!

Populisms

Dealing with that North Sea squall was straight forward; - the ship was carrying too much sail. Few situations are that clear, discovering the facts takes time and effort. It is so much easier to repeat the slogans, the simplistic black and white populisms; - statements that lack depth and integrity, albeit that they come on our smart phones, are displayed on the side of a bus, or seek to drain the swamp! Rabbi Lord Sachs writes that to gain traction “populism has to identify an enemy”¹, to reveal supposed innocent “victims”, those who are said to be suffering at the whim of evil exploiters; - polarizing formerly harmonious society, - leading to increasing confrontation, between us and them! When, as Christians we are called to love God and our neighbours as ourselves, - all of them!

Fundamental Benefits

We enjoy free speech, but we suffer from the freedom of the media and the web to circulate half-truths, prejudice, propaganda and negative slogans. In a recent Church Times² article, Bishop Nick Baines highlights benefits accrued since the end of the WW2: universal values that were assumed to be worth defending; - values that are now being challenged.

- That post-war liberalism was and still is a mutual benefit.
- That a rules-based international order is worth preserving.
- That globalization and the opening of national borders was, and is for everyone’s benefit.

Retreating into narrow nationalism, by chanting, - My country good or ill! - is a slogan contrary to the universal message of the Gospels, and Paul’s ministry across the then known World. We regularly pray for peace, harmony and understanding, and so we should, in the light of the many conflicts and threats that we face. The challenges to our civilized society are not confined by borders; they cannot be opposed by high fences, or by fiery rhetoric. Christians called to love their neighbours, are to live in hope and in the light of Christ.
Prophesy

In her first sermon in this Church, Susan, said that prophecy is an inner voice, a voice that needs to be heard. We should seek to live prophetically, not to gaze into crystal balls, but to discover and to make sense of the facts, in order to go forward with courage and hope; hope and harmony for the majority in the longer term (for there are rarely any quick fixes). Prophets are often unpopular, as they are inspired to speak truth to power. However autocratic leaders are doomed to fail, if they ignore the unwelcome advice of their critics and their subordinates.

Martin Luther King was a latter day prophet, once said: *The Church is not the master or the servant of the State, but rather the conscience of the State. It must be the guide and critic of the State, but never its tool. If the Church does not recapture its prophetic zeal, it will become an irrelevant social club, without moral or spiritual authority.* And we ignore the mistakes of the past at our peril. As Voltaire said: *History does not repeat itself; man repeats it!* Prophesy should be an close colleague of pragmatism, piety, progress and politics, - politics, the frail, fractured democracy that we cherish and despair, - the democracy that Winston Churchill described as the worst form of government, - apart from all the others!

Conclusion

Over the past two millennia Christ’s Church has survived many storms, slowly evolving in the light of events and inspiration, - Aristotle’s *phronesis*, the art of engaging practical wisdom. The Church has gradually proceeded by such practical-prophetic wisdom, insights and the inspired faith of those who were, and who still are, prepared to go aloft in the storm of conflicting ideas and false prophets.

In the rapidly changing World order, when we are beset by religious, political, economic and security squalls, - there is no merit in cowering in the bottom of the boat. There are things to be done; the rights and privileges that we enjoy are balanced by our responsibilities and duties, - duties towards our neighbours in Southfields and across the world. When Jesus’s disciples were afraid that they would die in the storm, He challenged them saying, - “Where is your faith?” Faith is hard won, - the faith that the disciples discovered at the first Easter and began to preach to many peoples at Pentecost, - it is ours, especially when we risk unpopularity, as we face the storms of life, with hope and faith, - never flinching from speaking truth to power. Amen

Words~ 920

Notes:
3. Eucharist, 6th February 2019 (the Rev Susan Bolen was licensed as Priest-in-Charge of St Paul’s, Wandsworth on 5th February 2019).