

Sermon for Evensong on the 13th Sunday after Trinity, 10th September 2017  
*Ezekiel 12:21-13:16; Acts 19:1-19*

Every now and again there is a news item or an article in one of the papers pointing out that fewer people claim to belong to the Church of England. Some go on to calculate how long it will be till there won't be any churches left.

There was quite a friendly article in the Weekend FT colour section by Jeremy Paxman along those lines yesterday. He lit on the efforts of Holy Trinity Brompton, the evangelical church which created the Alpha Course, and who specialise in 'planting' congregations in churches which are fading away - and indeed HTB, as they call it, was the church where Justin Welby, the Archbishop of Canterbury, started as well. Young ministers, without dog collars and robes, singing worship songs rather than hymns, and they pack them in! Perhaps Alpha and the HTB formula will be the salvation of the C of E, says Jeremy Paxman.

But of course there are lots of more traditional places where an ageing vicar ministers to an ageing flock of parishioners, declining in numbers. In some country places the vicar has to race round several churches at once. And there are traditional places like this, that are growing, if not spectacularly.

I have to say that I think that this question, whether the sea of faith is running out, as in Matthew Arnold's poem on 'Dover Beach' - which, after all, wrote the Christian faith off as doomed as long ago as 1867 - is a bit like one of those sandwich-board men whom you used to see tramping about with 'The End is nigh' or something similarly apocalyptic on their sandwich boards. The End has been nigh for rather a long time, and it still hasn't arrived. There's a plaque commemorating Matthew Arnold in St Andrew's in Cobham, by the way. I don't know what his precise connexion was - he was buried in Staines.

The prophet Ezekiel gets involved in the sandwich-board stuff too, in our Old Testament lesson.

Ezekiel 12:26 The word of the LORD came to me: 27 Man, he said, the Israelites say that the vision you now see is not to be fulfilled for many years: you are prophesying of a time far off. 28 Say to them, These are the words of the Lord GOD: No word of mine shall be delayed; even as I speak it shall be done. This is the very word of the Lord GOD. (Translation: the New English Bible).

I'm not desperately bothered about these expressions of gloom and doom about our church. The key thing isn't to get bums on seats. It's that church

should be a place for encounters with God, with all the blessings that come with that.

So why should we start thinking about 'Dover Beach' and having all these gloomy thoughts? I wonder whether some of it has to do with how we go about meeting God, encountering Him. In the Old Testament, in the books of the prophets, it's almost unremarkable, how the prophets do meet God. Look at Ezekiel. The context is that the ancient Israelites are either about to be or have been captured by the Babylonians. Just a few years afterwards, the Babylonians did invade, and the Israelites were rounded up and captured. Psalm 137,

'By the waters of Babylon  
We sat down and wept  
When we remembered Zion'

In that atmosphere of conquest and invasions, all armies and navies tried to get in touch with God, to find out if they were favoured. And God was close at hand. 'The Lord said to me, Man, prophesy to the prophets of Israel ...' is quite different from our experience. If we said that we'd been told by God to do something, we'd be gently humoured, but regarded as eccentric or even mad.

Does it mean that nowadays, by contrast, God has gone away? Does it mean that because we can't quite so easily get in touch with Him, we should give up even trying to encounter Him? Are we shy about it? I think there is a lot of British reserve to be factored in. What would you say, face to face, to Jesus, or God himself?

It begs the question, if you hear some rousing preacher, whether he is right in what he says. Just like the sons of Sceva in our lesson in Acts: were they the real thing? Were they in touch with God? Are we in touch with God and how can we tell if it's the genuine article?

We have grown to be more humanistic, more sceptical. Whereas in Ezekiel's time - say about 587BC - if the prophets told people that God wanted them to do something, they would simply obey, or disobey: they would not go behind it, they wouldn't try to reason it out.

Then again, just after the time of Jesus, Paul is tackled by people, the sons of Sceva, who are claiming supernatural powers.

It's always been a live issue for philosophers what is really true. I have on my desk a book called 'Truth Etc', by the great Aristotelian philosopher Jonathan Barnes - and it's 500-odd pages of ancient philosophy about what is true and

what is false. But what the disciples were worried about with the sons of Sceva, and what Ezekiel was criticising in false prophets, was not that some statements were illogical, but that they weren't authentic at all - they were, to use President Trump's favourite expression, fakes.

How can we tell? There aren't any prophets any more. Even though Jesus said he hadn't come to abolish the law or the prophets, in effect he did finish off the prophets. He was the voice of God in a way that no prophet has ever been.

But just as when Ezekiel prophesied, not everyone took notice - and we don't have any percentages to go on - so today not everyone bothers to take any notice of God. People don't believe that God takes an interest in human affairs as they may have believed he did in Old Testament times.

We do the stuff, we wreck the environment - or not, depending who you believe - and if Houston is flooded and the British Virgin Islands devastated by hurricanes, no-one, or almost no-one, would think of blasphemy or disobedience to the law of Moses as being possible causes.

Perhaps these days we make a distinction between religious beliefs and practices on one hand, and practical behaviour on the other: what you do as against what you believe in. God is in the spiritual bit, but not the practical, we might think.

But I wonder whether that will really do. I would suggest that, if you take that distinction, between acts and beliefs, to its logical conclusion, then religion can never - or never ought to - affect our behaviour, for better or worse.

Jesus clearly didn't see it that way. The Sermon on the Mount, loving your enemies, turning the other cheek, not even looking at someone in a lustful or a covetous way, for instance, are all about doing things, about action.

Because you believe, because you believe in a God of love, as a Christian, you are supposed to act in certain ways, not just to keep it as a mental or spiritual exercise.

But we don't. We don't always follow what Jesus taught, in a practical way. Indeed, sometimes people criticise what Jesus taught, the Sermon on the Mount, for example, as being impractical, impossible to achieve in real life.

If someone is pointing a gun at you, you don't turn towards him to offer him a bigger target - which might be how you would 'turn the other cheek'; and our society works economically on the principles of ambition and greed, not 'blessed are the meek'.

Or what about our recent encounters with Gypsies, with Travellers, in Cobham? Apparently they were washing horses, using washing-up liquid, in the River Mole at the picnic spot just up from the mill. They were holding trotting races on Portsmouth Road. There was drunkenness, fighting and betting. Wherever they went, people felt intimidated and there was a lot of litter.

It's sort-of assumed that the only thing to do with gypsies is to get them to move on: in other words, to drive them out of our community. Not in any sense to treat them as our neighbours, not in any sense to love them, let alone to love them as ourselves.

Well, let's think about it. I would suggest that Jesus didn't want us just to love, to be kind to, only nice people. Who is my neighbour? was the question. And the story of the Good Samaritan isn't just a story about two blokes, any two blokes. The hero is someone whom the Jews thought of as beyond the pale, a Samaritan. And Jesus had supper with, hung out with, friends who weren't all 'nice people'. Some were 'publicans and thieves'.

I think it's a serious challenge for us. What should our attitude towards the Gypsies, who come into our villages, be? Even if, indeed, they behave in an awful way? What should we think about 'immigrants'? What happens, or what should happen, when we meet someone who isn't very nice?

What about we feel about people in jail, or people who've committed the crimes and are sentenced to do community service? The community service bods did a great job tidying up round the church hall. Should we say 'thank you' to them?

'Justice is mine', says the Lord. So why do we lock up so many people? I'm just asking. There isn't an easy answer, an easy answer to any of these challenges. But I do think that Jesus wanted us not to go for easy answers. It isn't a simple distinction between religious stuff, spiritual matters, and actions, deeds. It isn't the case that nice deeds only happen to nice people.

What would you do? What if you had a knock at your door, and a couple of bedraggled-looking black men asked you for a drink of water? Somebody who goes to one of the local church house groups, when that topic came up, immediately thought that they would be refugees who'd smuggled themselves into this country by hiding in the back of a lorry - so the right thing would be to call the police and get them arrested.

Again, what do you think Jesus would have to say? And if, as I suspect, Jesus wouldn't be quite so quick to dial 999, then how should we be

influenced? What should we do? Or is our belief, our Christianity, just as the Roman proconsul Gallio said about the Jews when St Paul was on trial before him, just a 'question of words and names'?

I think we should really reflect - and pray - about that. It's more important than bums on seats.

Amen.

Hugh Bryant