

Sermon for Evensong on the Third Sunday of Lent 2019
Genesis 28:10-19, John 17:1, 11-19

What a week it has been. Tropical storm Idai - cyclone Idai - has done terrible damage in Mozambique and Zimbabwe, reducing most of the port city of Beira to ruins, putting thousands of people out of their homes. Hundreds of people have been drowned in the flood waters.

The special prosecutor Robert Mueller has delivered his report into possible Russian interference in the election of President Trump, and last but, arguably, not least, there are the latest instalments in the Brexit saga.

It's too early to know anything about Mr Mueller's report on the American election, but the aftermath of cyclone Idai certainly calls for our prayers, and for us to support the coordinating work of the Disasters Emergency Committee by being generous in the collection plate - if you are a taxpayer, please put your gift into a Gift Aid envelope and fill in your details, marking the envelope 'DEC' or 'Disaster Relief'. You can also give on line or by text. £25 will fund a temporary shelter for someone who has lost their home.

I'm not going to start going into the ins and outs of Brexit, as I'm sure that you are already fully briefed by your chosen news outlet - and I expect you're a little bit fed up with it, although it is hugely important.

What does our Christian faith bring to bear on any of these contemporary problems? How does the story of Jacob's Ladder, with angels ascending and descending from heaven, where the One True God lives, from where that One True God rules over the affairs of mortals - how does that relate to something like cyclone Idai, or to the debate concerning Brexit?

And before we tackle that, we have the lesson from St John's Gospel about the end of the Last Supper which Jesus had with his disciples, where he tells them that, in effect, he too is going up to heaven, and there is discussion concerning the implications of that.

I could have preached on both these lessons, on what they tell us about the divine nature, what God and the kingdom of God, heaven, are like; but I think that I would be short-changing you if these momentous events are going on in the world and I don't try at least to give you a Christian understanding concerning them as well.

I'm not going to talk more than I have about cyclone Idai, because although we can certainly rail against God in frustration and pain because such things happen, ultimately there isn't very much theology to discuss. 'The wind blows where it listeth'. The Lord does what he pleases. But we cannot realistically think that God chooses actively to inflict natural disasters on the human race.

No: what I want to talk about is conflict. Philosophical conflict, theological conflict. Two tribes going to war; Jacob and Esau, the sons of Isaac, fell out over who was the No1 son, and Esau sold his birthright for a 'mess of potage', for a bowl of soup. But they remained at odds over who was the one who would get the inheritance.

And when we turn to the story of the Last Supper, the Lent story leading up to Jesus' passion and death, the teaching of Jesus that he is the Son of God, part of the divine nature - but equally, that he is a human being like you or me, who is engaged in the normal activities of life - does God speak just through the prophets, as it occurs in the Jewish Law? Or is he present on earth incarnate, in a body, as a human being as well as being divine?

The Pharisees considered that Jesus was being sacrilegious and blasphemous in his preaching and in his claims to be God on earth. Two tribes; two ideas. One is right and one is wrong. Maybe both are right.

Three years, nearly, of wrangling over Brexit between one lot of people, who sincerely believe that they understand what is involved and that our country is better off out of the EU, and other people, very nearly as many, who voted to remain. What would Jesus do? How relevant is what is written in the Bible?

I don't think there's any point in my trying to dissect the merits of the argument between remainers and leavers. The point is that there is deeply-felt disagreement. The next week or so is going to be another intensive period with surprises and reversals nearly every day, no doubt. One of the really sad things about the whole business is the way that friends and families have been turned against each other.

The conflict between Jacob and Esau could be compared with the battles between Brexit people and the so-called 'Remoaners'. When we come to our prayers I will use the prayer which the archbishops have suggested, to try to begin the healing process. But I have to say that it is almost a question of saying one's prayers when everything else has failed - which is not something which one should be recommending from the pulpit. What can we think of?

The heart of the argument is a question of democracy; that there was a simple vote to stay or leave the European Union, and 37% of the people of the UK voted for it. No higher percentage voted against it. Again, I don't want to go into the minutiae, the rights and wrongs of that particular bit of democracy: whether a bare majority was the right criterion - 50% - or whether a higher pass

mark would have been sensible, in order to discover what the people as a whole wanted.

But democracy isn't the way in which we settle arguments one-to-one. Indeed, we say things like 'Two wrongs don't make a right'. Just because more people think a particular thing, it doesn't make it necessarily right. It remains a matter of opinion - and a disputed opinion at that.

Plato, in the 'Republic', suggested that in fact democracy wasn't actually the best method of government, and instead there should be rule by what he called the 'philosopher kings'; rule by wise men, by people who have been tasked to try to find out the truth and ways of action based on that truth, without fear or favour.

What would Jesus do? Jesus says very clearly that if you have a dispute with your brother on your way to worship, you should not give your gift in the Temple before you have patched things up with your brother (Matthew 5:23-24).

Jesus' teaching is that we should love one another, as he has loved us. So even we don't agree with each other, we mustn't think the worse of each other. We must try to remain friends and make room for each other's views, even if we think that the other one is completely mistaken.

I think it also means that we should be careful not to carry on with the dispute in a more inflammatory way than is strictly necessary; so rude Tweets and Facebook trolling are out.

When Jesus is praying to his heavenly father, in front of the disciples at the Last Supper, there is a shadow of violence hanging over everything, and Jesus of course knows what his fate is going to be. The conflict in which he is caught up has fatal consequences. You would expect that he would be bitterly

opposed to the Pharisees and chief priests, and that he would condemn them, even curse them.

It may well be that our understanding of heaven doesn't include ladders reaching up to the clouds and angels climbing up and down; and it may well be that when we hear Jesus' prayer to his father at the end of the Last Supper we can't see how it could be relevant in connection with somebody on the other side of the Brexit divide.

But be prepared to be pleasantly surprised. This is the Jesus of the Sermon on the Mount, turning the other cheek, loving one's enemies: 'Forgive them, for they know not what they do.'

Let us pray, using the words the Archbishops have suggested.

God of hope,
in these times of change,
unite our nation
and guide our leaders with your wisdom.
Give us courage to overcome our fears,
and help us to build a future
in which all may prosper and share;
through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen.

Hugh Bryant