

## **WAITING IN HOPE FOR CHANGE IN THE CHURCH AND THE WORLD**

St. Peter's Wolvercote, 20<sup>th</sup> July 2014, 10.0am and 12 noon.

Preached by Dr Tony Lemon

Romans 8, v.25 But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience.

These words will resonate with many in the Church of England this week, as they rejoice in the General Synod vote on women bishops. We can only guess at the women of earlier centuries who might have felt called to the priesthood at a time when their ordination would have been inconceivable. Many in the twentieth century must have hoped for what they did not see – and when it came in 1994 it came too late for them. Now, twenty years on, the final barrier has come down, amid widespread relief that the church has found a way forward that is acceptable to almost all, and rejoicing among the majority, men as well as women, who have longed for the church to take this step, because of its inherent fairness and the gifts which women will bring to episcopal ministry and also because of the huge damage that resistance to this change was doing to the image of the church in a society in which gender equality has become almost universally accepted.

This morning's reading from the Wisdom of Solomon speaks of God's mild judgement and forbearance, his forgiveness of those who repent and his great works which have filled his children with good hope. In our Epistle this morning Paul speaks to the Romans of human longing. He saw people's sin and the state of the world, but he also saw God's redeeming power, and the end of it all for him was hope. Paul's life was not a weary, defeated waiting: it was a life of vivid expectation, eagerly anticipating liberation and recreation wrought by the glory and power of God. Like Paul, we must battle with our own human nature and we must live in a world full of strife and suffering, as we have seen so tragically in Gaza and the eastern Ukraine this week – yet also a world which is also full of opportunities, of kindnesses and warm relationships, a world in which there is much joy – a world in which we are called to live abundantly. Whatever the balance of joy and suffering in our own lives, the ground of our hope as Christians is in Jesus Christ, 'the same yesterday, today and forever' (Hebrews 13, v.8), who by his resurrection has, in the words of the First letter of Peter, 'begotten us into a lively hope'.

Those who wanted equality for women in the church have waited a long time for the fulfilment of their hopes. Some were patient, others less so, more like the disciples as they listened to Jesus' teaching through the parables. They were not interested in God's timetable: they wanted the whole thing at once. In the parable of the wheat and the weeds in our Gospel this morning, the servants want to go straight away to the cornfield and root out the weeds. The farmer restrains them, because in their zeal to rid the field of weeds, they are very likely to pull up some of the wheat as well – the tares were a weed which was so like the wheat in the early stages that it was very difficult to tell them apart. Life is rarely simple, and there can be good reasons to wait. Had the Church of England tried to force through the earlier proposals for women bishops, it would have been more divisive and left more people unhappy: now there can be genuine rejoicing.

Perhaps Jesus had in mind the revolutionary groups of his day, who were only too ready to step into God's field and pull up what looked like weeds? There were many groups, including some of the Pharisees, who were eager to fight against both pagans on the one hand and compromised Jews on the other. Today we are all too aware of such groups in the Islamic world, bent on remoulding it quickly and violently to their vision of what an Islamic state or caliphate should be like – a vision which may well stray far from the true message of the Koran. An important part of Jesus' message is that the true kingdom of God doesn't come like that. At the heart of the parable of the weeds and the wheat is patience – not just the patience of the servants who have to wait and watch until the harvest, but the patience of God himself, who has to wait so long for the harvest of souls. Jesus wanted his followers to live in the world, with all its imperfections – to be in it but not of it, living with the tension of believing that the kingdom was indeed arriving in and through the work that he had begun, and would fully arrive, but not in a bang, rather in a process like the slow growth of a plant.

That tension of 'in the world but not of it' is very apparent in the debates that have led up to this week's General Synod decision. Those opposed to the ordination of women, first as priests and then as bishops, have tended to see the church as being led by the world, following secular trends. Underlying the whole debate has been the question of whether the church is seeking to change for the wrong reasons – and for some who think this is the case the emphasis on the damage being done to the image of the church by its conservatism confirms them in this belief. So the debate takes us to the heart of the relationship of the church and society, the church and the world.

History is full of examples of churches and Christians who have been too worldly, too easily prepared to accommodate their faith to the standards of the societies in which they live, too political in the sense of manoeuvring for their own worldly power and material riches: churches which have been of the world as well as in the world. We need only look to the history of the Papacy or to the history of relations between church and state in Britain to find an abundance of examples. The Catholic Church in Latin America and the former Portuguese colonies in Africa largely identified with the colonial authorities, and after independence in Latin American countries the church all too often identified with governments that represented the interests of wealthy landowners rather than the poor peasants and labourers – again with some splendid exceptions, including those who have embraced liberation theology. Sadly we also find churches which have accommodated themselves to abhorrent regimes, with only a small minority willing to stand up for Christian values, even if it meant martyrdom – men like Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Martin Niemöller and others in the Confessing Church in Nazi Germany, Beyers Naudé, Archbishop Desmond Tutu and the Catholic Archbishop Denis Hurley in apartheid South Africa.

Such examples are, like the cases Jesus uses in his parables, clearcut. Much of the time life is not like that, and the way forward is complicated for a church that wants to be true to its beliefs yet relevant to the world around it. Issues of gender and sexuality highlight such dilemmas at the present time – unfortunately so in many ways, because they figure so little in Jesus' own life and teaching, yet the church's preoccupation with them makes it seem to the world outside that they are so central to Christian faith. In this sense, it seems to me that the church is wholly justified in accepting and aligning itself with wider social changes, because not to do so would seriously weaken its whole message and mission. How can God possibly want his church to behave in a way that cuts it off from a wider society, and a younger generation in particular, that simply cannot see what all the fuss is about? The church's prime purpose is to spread the Christian faith and its values, and anything that seriously impedes that task has to be addressed. For this reason, and for all who have waited so long for the church to accept women and men as equals in its ministry, this week's decision is, I believe, truly one in which we can rejoice.