

“it’s not about the packaging . . .”

a sermon for Collinwood Rd United Reformed Church
Revd Dick Wolff, 8 Feb 2009

Readings for Epiphany 5B

The élite of the Jewish people have been taken by force out of their country to Babylon. Always conscious of God's promises to his people, they are wondering how it could have happened. “Has God decided to reject us and break his promise? Or maybe the Babylonian gods are more true, more powerful – at least, here in Babylon. Their civilisation is certainly very impressive. Maybe we would do better to become Babylonians and honour the Babylonian gods. It might avert some of the anti-semitism we're experiencing here.”

This is the prophet Isaiah's answer :

Isaiah 40 : 21 - 31

- ²¹Don't you know? Haven't you heard?
Isn't it clear that God created the world?
- ²²God is the one who rules the whole earth, and we that live here are merely insects.
He spread out the heavens like a curtain or an open tent.
- ²³God brings down rulers and turns them into nothing.
- ²⁴They are like flowers freshly sprung up and starting to grow.
But when God blows on them, they wilt and are carried off like straw in a storm.
- ²⁵The holy God asks, “Who compares with me? Is anyone my equal?”
- ²⁶Look at the evening sky! Who created the stars? Who gave them each a name?
Who leads them like an army?
The LORD is so powerful that none of the stars are ever missing.
- ²⁷You people of Israel, say, “God pays no attention to us!
He doesn't care if we are treated unjustly.”
But how can you say that?
- ²⁸Don't you know? Haven't you heard? The LORD is the eternal God, Creator of the earth.
He never gets weary or tired; his wisdom cannot be measured.
- ²⁹The LORD gives strength to those who are weary.
- ³⁰Even young people get tired, then stumble and fall.
- ³¹But those who trust the LORD will find new strength. They will be strong like eagles
soaring upward on wings; they will walk and run without getting tired.

The next reading follows last week's reading from the first chapter of Mark's gospel. Jesus has just been at the Meeting House (the synagogue) where he's created a big stir, and has done an exorcism

Mark 1 : 29 - 39

As soon as Jesus left the meeting place with James and John, they went home with Simon and Andrew. When they got there, Jesus was told that Simon's mother-in-law was sick in bed with fever. Jesus went to her. He took hold of her hand and helped her up. The fever left her, and she served them a meal.

That evening after sunset, all who were sick or had demons in them were brought to Jesus. In fact, the whole town gathered around the door of the house. Jesus healed all kinds of terrible diseases and forced out a lot of demons. But the demons knew who he was, and he did not let them speak.

Very early the next morning, Jesus got up and went to a place where he could be alone and pray. Simon and the others started looking for him. And when they found him, they said, “Everyone is looking for you!”

Jesus replied, “We must go to the nearby towns, so that I can tell the good news to those people. This is why I have come.” Then Jesus went to Jewish meeting places everywhere in Galilee, where he preached and forced out demons.

In this third reading, which is part of a letter to the Christians at Corinth, the missionary Paul seems to be answering two opposing criticisms : (a) that he is in the pay of a particular group of people and only promoting their message, but (b) that he is inconsistent in his behaviour – he doesn’t seem to be behaving as people expect. They don’t know what to make of him : is he a Jew or a Gentile? He seems to them to be woolly, indecisive. Paul makes it clear that he knows absolutely what he’s doing!

1 Corinthians 9 : 16 - 23

I don’t have any reason to brag about preaching the Good News. Preaching is something God told me to do, and if I don’t do it, I am doomed. If I preach because I want to, I will be paid. But even if I don’t want to, it is still something God has sent me to do. What pay am I given? It is the chance to preach the good news free of charge and not to use the privileges that are mine because I am a preacher.

I am not anyone’s slave. But I have become a slave to everyone, so that I can win as many people as possible.

When I am with the Jews, I live like a Jew to win Jews. They are ruled by the Law of Moses, and I am not. But I live by the Law – to win them. And when I am with people who are not ruled by the Law, I forget about the Law – to win them. (Of course, I never really forget about the law of God. In fact, I am ruled – by the law of Christ.)

When I am with people whose faith is weak, I live as they do – to win them. I do everything I can to win everyone I possibly can. I do all this for the Good News, because I want to share in its blessings.

(readings taken from the Contemporary English Version of the Bible)

Address : “It’s not about the *packaging* . . .”

These readings seem to be about people who are sort of on the edge between two worlds, which seems to describe fairly well where many Christians feel they stand in present-day Britain. Although there are actually a lot of Christians around, it doesn’t often feel like that in the historic churches, whose empty pews remind us that there was a time when a much higher proportion of people were pleased to be church-going Christians. The Christian presence is growing rapidly, but that is deceptive. It is Christian newcomers to Britain who are bringing their Christian identity with them to Britain, and wanting to celebrate it in their own language and style. Those people that have lived here for generations – it often feels – have abandoned the Christian faith, leaving those who are hanging on to Christianity feeling like relics from the past. Every now and then, people come along to a carol service or something – but you get the feeling that they’re doing that because it sort of connects them with a remembered past, not because it has anything to do with the future.

Oh, as long as we keep our Christian faith to ourselves, we can blend in perfectly – we look ‘normal’, we do ‘normal’ things. But as regards confessing Christian faith : well, that’s a different thing altogether. The gods of this land seem to have changed – I’m thinking of the sort of principles and ideologies on which this world runs : scientific truth (to which religion seems to have nothing to contribute other than put a moral brake on science’s progress), individualism and

the pursuit of personal happiness (“ask not what you can do for your country, but ‘what works for you’”) – I don’t know, make up your own list of the ‘gods of this passing age’.

Many of the Jews in Babylon actually did very well for themselves, but suffered a sort of identity crisis – particularly (I imagine) the ‘second-generation’ ones *born* in Babylon. (There’s an exhibition at the British Museum about Babylon this month, and a lecture about recent research on the Jews in Babylon which I intend to go to – please ask for details). Some of the older ones especially couldn’t forget the YHWH God they had sort of left behind, and they were struggling to work out how, in the absence of a Temple to worship in and in the face of anti-semitic prejudice, they could keep faith alive. “How can we sing the Lord’s song in a foreign land?” (Psalm 137)

Others, however, weren’t so bothered. They were impressed with Babylon’s power and achievements and wanted a bit of the action. No doubt they paid lip-service to their Jewish religious roots, but really they felt that they had grown out of religion. Well, *that* religion, anyway.

And for many in Britain, that’s how it is. Religion is something they think they’ve grown out of, left behind. It doesn’t ‘deliver’ like the modern gods (which of course we don’t call gods). It doesn’t work for them any more – although I don’t think most of the people who say that have ever really explored Christian faith.

Isaiah reminds both of these groups – both the faithful Jews trying to hold on to their ancestral faith (and being persecuted for it) and the thrusting go-ahead Babylonian Jews – he tells them that what’s at stake is not “what works for you”. “What works for you” may work at the moment, but times change, and can change rapidly. And who are the ‘you’, anyway? Who do you think ‘you’ are? We’re no more than insects, grasshoppers, he says.

What’s at stake is the *Truth*. Religion isn’t some private coping mechanism that may work for a few people. Religion is humanity’s quest for a truth that is absolutely true and authoritative for everybody – Jews, Babylonians, everybody.

God isn’t like the personal financial advisor in the cupboard under the stairs of the old bank advert (fat lot of use personal financial advisers have been, anyway!) God is the reason there is anything at all. “Don’t you know? God is what was there before there were any gods?” says Isaiah. It may not seem that YHWH God is “working for you” at the moment, but don’t be fooled. The whole universe will have to come back to this God in the end – God will outlast everything.

So let’s recognise what a responsibility we in the church have been given : the church is the only place where people really try to bear witness to the Truth that will outlast all the gods. The only place where God is ‘named’ and wrestled with (“Isra-el” means “one who wrestles with God”).

But let’s not think that bearing witness to God is simply a matter of recycling religious slogans or keeping a religious compartment – a cupboard under the stairs – in our lives that we can retreat to when things get a bit difficult. The Church, if it is speak sensibly about God in this Babylon, also needs to be able to speak sensibly and authoritatively about particle physics and cosmology, about genetics and evolutionary biology, economics, political theory, moral philosophy : about anything and everything. As they said about Jesus “This man speaks with real authority”. Why can’t we sidestep that stuff? Because that too is created by God! Let’s give thanks that there are Christians working away in all those fields on our behalf. Thank goodness we don’t each have to do it all; that there is a Body of Christ of which we are only a small part. But don’t ‘pooh-pooh’ all that hard intellectual work with dismissive comments about ‘ivory towers’ either. Our God is God of the Universe, not our private counsellor. In laboratories and libraries, at academic conferences and political meetings, Christians are building the Church’s knowledge base and authority outside the often-cosy and introverted world of the Church.

OK, let's turn to Paul now.

Over 500 years after the Babylonian exile Paul, too, straddles two worlds. Rome, as far as many Jews of the day were concerned, was their modern version of Babylon. But Paul is a full Roman citizen – his family were probably minor aristocracy. And yet he's also a Jew. So how does that work? (Try reading Romans chapter 13 for Paul's defence of Roman power . . .) Rejected by the purist Jews of the first Christian church in Jerusalem and severely punished in synagogues across the Empire, he's often imprisoned by Roman magistrates as well¹. He gets it from both sides, and he got it from both sides in the infant church, too.

In the world, we keep quiet about our faith and “do as the Romans do”. How many vicars have tried to be trendy, how often have you seen Christians trying hard to show that ‘we can have fun too’ (but still managing to give the impression that they've never known what real ‘fun’ is!) And yet back in the church we stick to traditional ways for fear of upsetting people.

I'm a classic case : a good Free Church boy who went to Sunday School, gladly did the Scripture exam, loved singing hymns and never smoked pot; but also one of the hippy generation who drew enormous energy from the great rock music of the late '60s, and still do. Who, like most of my generation, had a not-very-churchy attitude to sexual ethics and felt really very conflicted over that. Who, once I'd left home, lived and worked for years in a very alcohol-fuelled exclusively male world, and a very irreligious one at that. Somehow I managed to hold it together – must have been the Holy Spirit, the great ‘go-between’, the great ‘stitcher-together’ of all things.

But I'm not convinced I – or we – have got it right. We've kept our faith-life and life-in-the-world in separate compartments. We're sort of schizophrenic. I did wonder whether becoming a minister was a backwards step into the Christian ghetto. Paul was absolutely *not* schizophrenic. He was fired up with the explosive Good News that the great new High Priest, Jesus, through his death, had blown apart the walls that kept the non-Jewish world out of the special relationship with God that Jews celebrated. A relationship with the most holy God was now possible for all, because of God's sheer loving generosity in Christ and the scandal of the cross. Whether he was mixing in Roman and Greek dinner parties and eating meat offered to idols, or whether he was being strictly kosher in Jewish households, the whole purpose (as far as Paul was concerned) was to ignore the inessentials that divide people and focus on the one essential – Christ.

That's the critical question for us in our mission : what is essential to real life (as Christians understand it) and what is secondary? What can we be relaxed about, and what can we *not* be relaxed about in our Christian witness? And you know and I know (I think) that the one thing we *cannot* be relaxed about is the need to proclaim – in words – Christ. The very thing we find most difficult! Why? Because it challenges the dual personality we've grown accustomed to.

We can put worship into a traditional hymn/sermon sandwich. If that doesn't grab a generation who rarely (in school) had to sit for an hour facing the front and who expect to be able to get up and walk around and discuss things with others as they go – well, relax. Family services in the hall, ‘Café Church’ : go for it. The packaging isn't important. I can hear Paul saying – “I'm easy. I can do either, my hands aren't tied”. What matters above all is what's in the package. Are people hearing and celebrating good news in Jesus? Do we know what that good news really *is*? Are people growing in faith? Are they being changed into the likeness of Christ more and more each day, and relishing the challenge? Are they getting stuck into transforming the world for justice and peace in the name of Christ, our reconciliation with God?

¹ See 2 Corinthians 11 : 24 - 25. The ‘forty lashes less one’ which he suffers five times at the hands of synagogue authorities could be fatal. The reason for the ‘less one’ is to avoid the possibility of the executioner going over the prescribed 40 by mistake, because if the victim died the executioner would have become a murderer.

Both our reading from the Corinthian letter and from Mark have this sense of needing to keep moving. Leave unnecessary baggage behind. In Jesus's case : he's become a local celebrity. People are queuing at the door, asking for healing and exorcism . If that happened here we might think we were a success; but Jesus wants to keep moving : there are neighbouring towns to tell about God's breaking out into the world; and then (in the distance) there's Jerusalem

There's no standing still in the Christian life, it would seem. Always new things to learn, new people to get to know, new work to undertake, but underneath all of it there is one constant : God, the Most High, the God before all gods. At the shops, in the pub or restaurant, at work, school, alone in front of the TV – God, waiting to break out, cut through the distractions and show us a better way.

Everything else is packaging.

The universe itself is packaging. When Jesus was killed it was as if the energy inside the package built up so much that the packaging started to rupture and split (like the great curtain in the Temple).

So much human effort is devoted to trying to stuff God back into our packaging again. “Don't bother”, says Paul. “Those who trust the Lord will find new strength”, says Isaiah; “They will be strong like eagles soaring upwards on wings.” They will be free – ‘Free at last!’

