

Recapturing the Imagination of Our Culture: Sermon Preached at St John's, Devizes, Sunday 26th June 2022 (Patronal Festival)

Readings – Isaiah 40: 1–11; Luke 1:57–66, 80

A voice says, 'Cry out!' And I said, 'What shall I cry?'

Some of you will by now know of my fondness for financial crisis movies. One, called *The Big Short*, tells the tale of the few who saw in advance the coming American mortgage crash of the late 2000s. They were a ragbag collection of outsiders – an autistic genius, bright young things with no stake in the system, and even a man so honest about his own greed that had no illusions about the probity of others. They were scoffed at for years, but they were right, and betting against the market made them earthly riches at the very moment when others were losing their shirts.

Outsiders often perceive truths too disturbing for those comfortable with the existing order. Yet the line between genius and madness can be thin and it can be hard to tell those voices crying profound truths into the wilderness apart from the cacophony of those howling at the Moon. Is it always safest to herd ourselves behind conventional wisdom, because then at least if we are wrong, we will have plenty of company in our mistakes.

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Our first reading presents us with a vision of God nurturing and feeding His people after a time of trouble. This is from the fortieth chapter of Isaiah, the introduction to the second of Isaiah's three distinct blocks of writing, and it was written in Babylon, probably towards the end of the half century of exile from Jerusalem. It sought to reassure people who had suffered much for their faith that God had not given up on them and would soon allow them to return home.

One verse is quite difficult and often glossed over. While Jerusalem's "penalty is paid" that is because "she has received from the LORD's hand double for all her sins." There is no attempt here to avoid the idea that the exiles, mostly from the ruling elite of Jerusalem, were themselves largely responsible for their own

misfortune. Instead of justice, they chose selfishness, idolatry, and the path of least resistance. They silenced and persecuted those who told them difficult truths they didn't want to hear. They had lost the Kingdom and they had blinking well deserved it.

Despite that, God hadn't abandoned them. Having dealt with them, God will soon return them to Jerusalem. Yet much has changed. The good old days are gone forever and there will be no restoration of their political power. They will have to learn to be faithful to God and live out His commandments while under the power of others.

When God liberates us from what oppresses us, he often does it through means we could never imagine to a future we would never have chosen for ourselves.

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In March and April there was some characteristically snappy argument between clergy in the *Church Times* letters' page about the Church in Wales, where parishes have been abolished and replaced with what are termed 'mission areas'. Richard Harries, the former Bishop of Oxford, sympathised with those complaining, but supported the change as a means of creating structures that will allow us to survive what is likely to be a long period of poor church attendance. At the same time he said, quite correctly, that low attendance could not be fixed by structural tinkering but was, and I quote, "to do with our failure to recapture the imagination of our culture for the Christian story."

That phrase struck me powerfully. The Christian story no longer holds the imagination of our culture. We need to ask ourselves what stories now grip the collective imagination. How did they come to displace the Christian Gospel as the central narrative of Western societies? And how did the Gospel remain the central narrative of some other societies? What might it look like to recapture the imagination of our culture?

Certainly it won't look like a restoration of the past. That is gone.

Diocesan Synod met last week. We spent a lot of time talking about structures and finances. These are important things. They are, however, always discussed in the context of declining congregations, and structural changes will not arrest and reverse that decline. Nor do I think that those few with the gift for person-to-person evangelism will become more numerous than they are now. We need instead to discover a renewed way of telling the Christian story so that it recaptures the imagination of the people.

We rarely seem to discuss that at any of our meetings, and only rarely do I hear bishops show the capacity for that sort of strategic thinking on communications and culture. This is no surprise as they are not selected for that skillset. They are chosen as managers not storytellers. Perhaps we need the sort of unconventional perspective that tends to belong to outsiders.

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This morning's Gospel related some events that took place more than five hundred years after the exiles returned to Jerusalem. The long period of peace they had enjoyed at first was long gone, and the mighty Romans were the latest in a long series of conquerors. The land was convulsed by political tension, and rebellion hung in the air.

It is in this context we have a very strange tale. A respected holy man is struck dumb when he refuses to accept – and who can blame him? – that God is going to grant a son to him and his wife, who has never been able to conceive, at a biologically impossible age. After the promised child is born, the old man's speech is restored once he names the infant, who already seems to have the hand of God on him. No wonder the neighbours were scared.

When the boy, our patron saint John the Baptist, grew up, he proclaimed the great and holy leader anticipated with increasing intensity during the long centuries of occupation would soon arise. He foresaw correctly, but this leader, Jesus Christ, would not restore political sovereignty, even to build an earthly kingdom where godly principles would reign. Instead, He would proclaim

repentance and the forgiveness of sins, eternal life won through death, and the perpetual recreation of an evening meal among friends.

This sometimes captured the imagination of great empires, to the extent that we have come to think that this is the normal pattern of Christianity. This vision also, however, sustained other people through centuries of persecution, indeed often sustained and still sustains people whose allegiance to Christ is the cause of their persecution.

Wherever it was held, a central feature of this vision was its understanding that we human beings are completely dependent on God who created us. Let me suggest tentatively that the most important thing that captured the imagination of our culture from Christianity was the idea that we human beings were capable of saving ourselves, of building heaven on earth. Now, in this world of climate change and engineered diseases and terrifying weapons of war, we're in a bit of a mess.

So were the people of the Holy Land when John the Baptist was born. God is working His purposes out in 2022 just as He was then, and in Babylon; and just like then this usually happens where few are bothering to look, unseen by those who set the agenda and who think they have power and control.

Trust therefore that no period of exile or decline lasts forever. God will liberate us, through a means we could never have expected, for a future we would never have conceived of. Somewhere God is setting someone on fire with the ideas that will recapture the imagination of our culture for the Christian story.

Probably it will be an outsider.

Pray that God might grant us the humility to listen for wisdom from where we don't expect it; discernment to recognise the latter-day John the Baptists from the madding crowds; and then the courage to retell God's story in a way fit for a future that we cannot yet imagine but which will be different from what we would have chosen for ourselves.

And now to God be the glory, the Father the creator of all life, the Son the restorer to new life, the Spirit who breathes in all life, now and forever, as is most justly his due. Amen.