

Sermon for Trinity 2 by David Wilbourne

We cannot forget the beauty

On placement in Seacroft,
the roughest part of Leeds, in 1980,
I unwisely encouraged the Sunday School
to act out the story of the Good Samaritan.
The robbers,
who were supposed to have a minor part,
instead stole the show
and beat up
not only the itinerant Jew,
but also the priest,
the Levite and
the eponymous Samaritan
as a mass of flailing arms and legs
tumbled down the aisle.

The Vicar of Seacroft also had his problems.
He entertained the toddlers at a Pram service
by acting out the parable
of the house built on sand
and the house built on rock.

When Jesus first told the story
he did not have the advantage that vicar had,
of having to hand
a tray of sand,
a tray of rocks,
a pack of cards and a jug of water.
Which is just as well,
because if he had had,
I doubt we would ever
have heard of the parable again.

On the tray of sand

The vicar duly built a house of cards,
and then poured water over the construction
to show how flimsy it all was.

To his obvious annoyance,
not a single card shifted
until the hand of the Vicar,
if not the hand of God,
assisted the demolition.

The jug of water had more luck
with the house of cards built on the rocks,
in that the first drop
brought the whole lot crashing down.

The children thoroughly enjoyed the show,

although I shudder to think

what moral they took away with them.

Thank God

they didn't become Barrett House builders.

Or perhaps they did.

What I took away

was a picture of a house built on sand
which surprisingly,
infuriatingly,
wonderfully survives.

This morning we are focusing in particular
on our worship,
and picturing it as a house built on sand
is not a bad image,
a coming together of the solid

and the shifting
which wonderfully
miraculously
survives.

All worship contains some parts that are given,
their inclusion non-negotiable.

Any Eucharist has to include bread and wine,
the words of Jesus at the first Last Supper
set in an intensely prayerful atmosphere:

he took

he blessed

he broke

he gave -

are our foundations, our solid reference points.

But no act of worship,

no Eucharist is celebrated in a vacuum.

We all come to a certain place

at a certain time,

our heads and lives full

of big issues and little issues,

the shifting sands of current affairs,

some of which we have had a part in,

most of which we have simply taken note of.

We bring all that to bear

on the timeless mystery

celebrated here.

I've said before that

we bring the lesser calvaries,

the tragedies we daily encounter,

the shifting sands as it were,

we bring them and let them be informed by the ultimate
Calvary
our rock,
celebrated here.

But the process is a two-way one.

The ultimate Calvary celebrated here
is itself informed by the lesser calvaries we bring.

Seeing Christ in his broken body
and the spilled blood

is an invitation

to see him in the shifting sands of

every broken body,

in every drop of spilled blood.

Worship should draw us to make connections,

connections with God,
connections with his creation,
a true common union.

It should inspire us

both with the beauty of holiness

and the call to sacrificial discipleship.

When Sharon Whittington was training with us,

we used to device acts of worship from scratch –

a good way of learning what is worship and what isn't.

Sharon is a very imaginative and well resourced person

and we used to come up with some marvellous ideas.

However,

when we'd printed it all out

I used to apply one final check.

Where in this act of worship do we expect people will be moved?

That didn't necessarily mean they would be moved or not, sometimes folk are present in their bodies but miles away in their heads, but where could we expect moving points, points where the membrane between heaven and earth was thin?

If we couldn't identify such points, then we scrapped the whole thing because as an act of worship, it was useless.

One question I'd like to raise is

Where are our moving points in this act of worship.

Different points for different people,

but where are they?

Do we treat points we have responsibility for with reverence, as having the potential of moving others?

I began with two pictures, so I'll end with a couple.

There's a story of the Russian Prince Vladimir in the tenth century sending out spies to investigate the various religions to see which would be the best for Russia. Islam was rejected outright for its ban on alcohol; where would the Russians be without vodka to warm the chilliest of winters?

German Catholicism was also observed but rejected for being too rigid, too regimented,

too complicated.

After all, it was Rupert Brooke who claimed that in Berlin
even the tulips bloom when they are told.

Then the spies went to Constantinople
and simply watched the Orthodox liturgy
in the great church of Hagia Sophia,
Holy Wisdom.

They returned to Russia saying,
'We cannot forget the beauty.'

And the rest is history.

I used to take lads and lasses training for Anglican ministry
for a weekend at Ampleforth,
and came away feeling like that,
'We cannot forget the beauty.'
The beauty of holiness.

Do people come away from this celebration
feeling like that?

They should or we are failing them.

My final picture is of a modern Russian
who was taken by his English hosts
to Mattins at St Paul's Cathedral in London.

At the heart of the capital,

St Paul's should be the flagship for the best practice
in Anglican worship.

Afterwards the Russian said

that what he saw being done there
did not seem to him to be worship,
nor did the congregation gathered there
seem to have come
either expecting worship

or expecting **to** worship.

It harks back to my moving point criterion.

But it's a good point.

Is what we do here worthy of the name worship?

Do we come expectant?

Because unless you're expectant,

faith and worship will never come to birth.