

The Show Must Go On. A Personal Reflection rather than a sermon.

Listeners to the BBC 4 Daily Programme “Today” are used to the ending at 9a.m. these days. The names of the producers are announced and then about two minutes’ air time are allocated to people who would otherwise be giving a public performance in a theatre or concert hall. Hence we are given a snippet of a song or a piece of music before they are faded out. They call it “The Show Must Go On” - despite lockdown, social distancing or whatever.

Today, I should have been preaching at a village church in Essex. The new Rector, having obtained Bishops’ permission, affirmation of my sanity, and health checks and so on, had agreed for me to take his place, because it is exactly 80 years since I was baptised in that church’s font. The then Rector (a kindly man; - I just remember him, for he died in 1950) duly baptised me in the name of the Holy Trinity using the order of service in the Book of Common Prayer. There were no alternatives then.

Visualize that service, though undoubtedly present, I have no memory of it. My parents, Aunty from next door, and who else? Godparents, if they could be found, and able to travel, in those early months of World War Two, my young sister. That’s all. And the Rector, Mr Pollard, generously gave me two shillings and sixpence, - a half crown. (For those bored with this sermon already may now skip to the footnotes to this paper.)

The opening prayer which Mr Pollard used over that font, includes these words:

*We beseech thee, for thine infinite mercies, that thou wilt mercifully look upon this child (me!); wash him with the Holy Ghost; that, he, being delivered from thy wrath, may be received into the ark of Christ’s Church; and being **steadfast in faith, joyful through hope, and rooted in charity**, may so pass the waves of this troublesome world, that finally he may come to the land of everlasting life...*

Allow me to romanticise. That font, over 800 years old, had been used for thousands baptised before me, and possibly hundreds since. It is placed in the traditional position at the entrance to the church, for baptism symbolises our entry into the Christian Faith. The reception, in the words of the prayer was like being “received into the ark of Christ’s church.” Let’s pause there for a moment. Think of the symbolism: the font is in the nave - Latin “Navis” a ship. Look up into the roof and see the keel shaped vaulting of a medieval church. You are received into the safety of the ship - the ark, which brings to our minds, Noah’s ark, and even perhaps the ark of the Covenant in the

Old Testament. Norwich Cathedral has an impressive display of roof bosses,

high up in the rafters, and one is a medieval depiction of Noah's Ark. Hereford Cathedral's Mappa Mundi shows us Noah's Ark, which in today's interpretation places it in on the Iran- Armenia border. Think that symbolism through. We are safe within the ark of Christ's Church. I know - the church is not a building, it's people, so we are often told. But I miss my church buildings - and I'm glad that from tomorrow we can at least enter them once more for prayer. I shall feel surrounded by all those who have gone before me, once again in a place where in T S Eliot's phrase, "where prayer has been valid".

Had I been able today to be in the church where I was baptised, I think I would have thought of those who had gone out as labourers into Christ's vineyard (Matthew 9: 38) - all those who had been baptised and called to go out in Christ's name inviting others to share in the love and grace of God.

Mr Pollard's prayer asked that those he christened might specifically be three things:

Steadfast in faith.

I hope so, but let us confess that often faith takes its knocks. The prayer did not ask for health, wealth or happiness, but that there would be a steadfastness, a steadiness in holding on when in difficulty, when facing seemingly insurmountable problems, when asking in the face of tragedy, Where is God in all this? Why do bad things happen to good people?

We used to sing an early 19c hymn, now absent from modern hymn books:

*Oft in danger, oft in woe,
Onward Christians, onward go;
Bear the toil, maintain the strife,
Strengthened with the Bread of Life.* (H Kirke White 1785 - 1806)

Honestly, it hasn't really been like that for me. I've been strengthened by the Sacrament of Communion, yes; and by the fellowship and prayers of those I know and meet who have been baptised into Christ Himself.

Joyful through hope and rooted in charity.

It is said that "hope" is that which is exercised by the members of a congregation when the preacher says, "And finally..." Christian hope

merits far more than a few lines in this sermon. Instead I will quote a poem.

Just a year ago Revd Dr C.M Kao died. He was an Asian Church Leader who had been President of the Presbyterian Church of Taiwan. I heard him speak at the General Assembly of the United Reformed Church meeting in 1986. I have never forgotten it. Dr Kao had just been released after serving four years of a prison sentence imposed on him during those troubled times for Christians in Taiwan. He spoke without rancour, thanked everyone for their prayers and support during his years in prison. He then spoke of his continuing concern to speak and act for Christian witness and justice, and ended by reading a poem written during his incarceration.

*I asked the Lord for a bunch of fresh flowers,
But instead he gave me an ugly cactus with many thorns.
I asked the Lord for some beautiful butterflies,
But instead he gave me many ugly and dreadful worms.
I was threatened,
I was disappointed,
I mourned.
But after many days,
Suddenly
I saw the cactus bloom
With many beautiful flowers.
And those worms
Became beautiful butterflies
Flying in the Spring wind
God's way is the best way
Now read Romans 5 verses 1 - 8. The show must go on.*

(And now in a different font (!) that useless bit of information) :

The Revd Fred Pollard in 1940 served a parish with a population of 518, for which he received £518 pa (today's equivalent £28,000) So he could afford a half a crown!

Preb. L J B Snell at Holy Trinity Hereford had a population of 6,000. His annual income was £354.

Preb S G Chance at All Saints, population 4,836, got £526; The Rector of St Nicholas, population 2028, £428) and he of Breinton, population 509, received £335pa)