

Seventh Sunday after Pentecost - 2018

Horbling Parish Church in Lincolnshire is one of many fine churches on the edge of the Fenland. It has a long history and the building shows many different architectural styles. As you enter the church you immediately encounter the octagonal medieval font and above it a window with the inscription 'Suffer the little Children.' The window was given in memory of The Revd. Plumpton Stravenson Wilson, Vicar of the Parish early in the 20th century. His daughter Agnes and her husband Arthur Ramsey brought their son to the church and he was baptized Arthur Michael by his grandfather. He would go on to become the 100th Archbishop of Canterbury. The church, so I read is usually locked and to gain entry you need to visit the big house next door to get a key. Archbishop Michael Ramsey visited the church during his primacy, he found it open and went inside. He stood at the font quietly muttering in his rather eccentric way 'O font, font, font in which I was baptized.' The story goes that a cleaning lady appeared and asked him rather rudely how he had managed to get in!

I'm a fan of Michael Ramsey. I like, among other things, his treatment of that great Anglican ideal of the Via Media, the middle way. Ramsey followed the thinking of FD Maurice a priest and scholar of the 19th Century (as did our own Bishop Burgmann), he held to particular understanding of the via media. It wasn't a wishy washy nothingness we are sometimes accused of but the means by which the Anglican Church lived with comprehensiveness. This is important, it is something that we can offer to the wider Church, but I wonder is it a treasure that we are in danger of losing?

Perhaps I'm just getting old! But I'm not really too sure sometimes what to say for fear of causing offence. The problem is that as more folk seem to claim to be offended there are even more queueing up to offend them. It seems that we have reached a point where some believe the only way they can further their cause or at least discuss it, is to either offend or be offended and so discourse is stymied. FD Maurice spoke in terms of a dialectic; in this way opposing ideas are held in a tension which *in time* can be reconciled. Ramsey looked to the Corinthian Church and found both joy and sorrow in their unity...have another look at Paul's second letter to those folk.

To some extent of course this has always been the case, look at this morning's psalm:

Have mercy upon us, O Lord, have mercy upon us,
for we have had more than enough of contempt.

The 17th century poet John Dryden echoed this sentiment:
"Bold knaves thrive without one grain of sense,
But good men starve for want of impudence."

In our passage from the Old Testament this morning we hear God's response. He speaks to Ezekiel: The descendants are impudent and stubborn. I am sending you to them, and you shall say to them, "Thus says the Lord God."

Let them know that a prophet is in their midst. Its good old fashioned stuff, impudence is not a word that we hear much these days; but impudence abounds.

We do indeed live in strange times. Diversity is a buzz word! It's a good thing; it is part of our DNA. But we haven't followed Paul well, we haven't followed his teaching on the corporate body and diversity morphs into individualism and it tears the fabric of the body. And under the veneer of the freedom of individualism, under the guise of freedom of speech we are becoming an impudent mob! I think again of St Paul writing to the Galatians: do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence, but through love become slaves to one another. Take care he writes that you are not consumed by one another. We are consuming one another! Comprehensiveness is imperiled.

And they took offence at him. Just this week we have seen impudence in sport, education and in politics. The political arena of all places should be way that opposing parties deal with their differences, debating robustly yet with civility. Civility is more than being polite. It also includes showing respect for others — both those we know and those we don't. In other words, civility is what equips us for living daily with strangers. This is truly living in the body. St Paul struggles with this living. His 'thorn in the flesh' could very well be his opponents those who hold him in contempt. But he is told that such opposition is the means by which the power of God will be revealed. When we are civil when we do the right thing even when it might not be in our own self-interest, can we dare believe that the power of God is revealed?

Jesus has returned to his home town and the townspeople take offence at him. He has changed, the things that were once important to him are no longer. He is pushing out the boundaries of comprehensiveness, folk are offended and there is a fracture in their relationship - 'And he could do no deed of power there.' Miracles occur within community, because faith happens in community and community by its nature is about comprehensiveness. We increasingly live in a community which is consuming itself. Rudeness abounds, civility it seems is very unfashionable. We talk diversity, but this requires a dialectic - a holding together of diverse opinions and views, and we are struggling.

What of us? What of our living together in the Body? How do we respond when we experience difference? We must hold together those fundamental doctrines of each of us being made in the image of God *and* that of the Body, each dependent on the other. Are we big-hearted and warm and generous and kind... because that's how God is, and if we don't reflect that how are we going to show God's deeds of power to the world?

We must be slow to take offence and civil with those whose opinions we do not share - they might be a thorn in the side from time to time... foolishness? This attitude is making of miracles. Amen.