

Sermon for Down Ampney Festival and Feast of St. Bartholomew: The NHS 70th Anniversary and the Christian Socialism of Ralph Vaughan Williams?

Choral Evensong - 3pm Sunday 26th August.

Isaiah 43: 8-13 and Acts 5: 12-16

For the record, I don't believe in reincarnation. But if I did, and if I had to be reincarnated as an animal, I would come back as a St. Bernard dog. I have my reasons. First, I'd like to be a saint, and this is as about close as I'll get. Second, I believe in searching for the lost. Third, everyone loves a good dog, so there is a chance of being both liked and gainfully employed, and you can rarely do *both* of these in the church – trust me on this. And finally, a rescue mission that involves a hip flask full of malt whisky can't be all *that* bad. Indeed, find or lose your victim, it still ends with a well-deserved drink. (Even though I am tee-total).

One of the more famous quotes from another saint of the same era as Bernard is from Benedict: "Before all things and above all things, care must be taken of the sick; so that the brethren shall minister to them as they would to Christ himself; for he said: "I was sick and ye visited me."" [*Rule of St. Benedict*]. Benedict had read his gospel: "Jesus went forth and saw a great multitude and was moved with compassion towards them, and he healed their sick" [*Matthew 14:14*].

Twenty years ago in 1996, I published an article on the healing miracles of Jesus which pressed the question, not about whether or not these miracles ever happened, but what they meant to their audiences either as events, or as written narratives. It caused a bit of a storm – at least for theology.

The paper effectively argued that the healing miracles of Jesus were not in themselves particularly important, either as historical events or as plain narratives. What was more significant about the miracles were the political implications that flowed from them. I drew attention to the fact that in the forty or so healing miracles recorded we hardly ever learn the name of the person who is healed. This seemed to me to be in itself quite significant, pointing to the insignificance of the beneficiaries.

But, what was arguably more revealing about the nature of these miracles was the gospel writers' willingness to tease the reader by naming the category of affliction: leprosy, mental illness, single mothers with dead children, orphans, people of other faiths, the elderly, and the handicapped. I could go on. Jesus hardly ever heals his friends, and rarely ever heals anybody with any significant social, moral or political status. In nearly every case, the healings of Jesus are directed towards those who are self-evidently on the margins of society, or who have been excluded from the centres of social, political, moral or religious life. Not only that, the friendships that Jesus made, also suggest that he was more than willing to share his time and abundance with this same group of people: nameless, numberless outcasts.

This observation is not particularly interesting in itself, but it does start to raise a question about what the healing miracles were for, if they are in effect "wasted" on groups of people who appear to be unable to make a significant response? Yet when one turns to the sorts of encounters that Jesus has with religious and political authorities, particularly when they are accusing him of betrayal, we begin to see that Jesus' healing activity was, for the authorities, a dangerous, even subversive activity.

Jesus consorts with the *wrong* sorts of people in the eyes of the righteous; he's not in church, but "down the pub". Moreover, Jesus gets no return for his investment in 'the lost' or 'the unclean'; he wilfully loves the loveless, and seeks out those who everyone else has given up on. In all of these healing encounters, the remarkable thing about Jesus' ministry is that it discriminates – *for* the unknown, the lost, the marginalised and the victimised. And almost nobody else. Jesus is the body-language of God: his incarnation expresses God's bodily feeling for unseen, unheard and untouched.

So, Jesus heals the widow of Nain's son – a boy in an Arab part of Palestine, so almost certainly non-Jewish. Jesus heals Samaritans, slaves of Roman centurions, people of other faiths – and many of no faith. The healings of Jesus are just an extension of God's compassion for all of humanity – but especially for the alien and stranger. Indeed, sometimes almost exclusively for such groups and individuals.

So, how does this relate to Ralph Vaughan Williams? There is a kind of prevailing assumption that Christ Church Oxford is a natural home for the 'Conservative Party at Prayer'. Over the years, Christ Church - or 'the House' as it is known - has produced significant numbers of Conservative British Prime Ministers - with Gladstone perhaps the notable exception. The Christ Church that the media links with the Bullingdon Club (portrayed in the 2014 film, 'The Riot Club') can sometimes epitomise an image of over-privileged undergraduates, engaging in rampant anti-social classism.

But when you delve a little deeper into the political proclivities of 'the House', you find a rather more mixed picture. Bishop George Bell's stance on carpet-bombing of German cities in World War Two was striking for its prophetic prescience; and here the Church of England could point to a reasonable record in public theology for much of the twentieth century. Bell was a scholar at Christ Church, Oxford, gaining a First in Classical Moderations in 1903. After Oxford he attended Wells Theological College and was ordained deacon in 1907. He went to work as a curate for three years in the industrial slums of Leeds. His role there was the Christian mission to industrial workers, a third of whom were Indians and Africans from the British Empire.

In 1910 Bell returned to Christ Church, Oxford, as a student minister and as lecturer and 'Student Fellow' Classics and English, 1910–14. Here too he was socially engaged, as one of the founders of a cooperative for students and university members and sitting on the board of settlements and worker-development through the Workers' Educational Association (WEA). From 1925 to 1929, Bell was Dean of Canterbury. In 1929 Bell was appointed Bishop of Chichester. In this role he organised help for workers affected by the Great Depression. He also took part in the meetings of the National Union of Public Employees, where he was welcomed as 'Brother Bell'.

This is, of course, precisely what Jesus teaches and practices through his healings. Jesus healings are inherently political – they break down barriers, and challenge preconceptions. They bring grace from unexpected places, and pour love on the undeserving and unclean, not the righteous and sanctified. God works in these places to teach us about the love and mercy he wants us to embody and practice.

That's why the New Testament reading tonight is so telling for us, from Acts Chapter 5:

The apostles performed many signs and wonders among the people...As a result, people brought the sick into the streets and laid them on beds and mats so that at least Peter's shadow might fall on some of them as he passed by. Crowds gathered also from the towns around Jerusalem, bringing their sick and those tormented by impure spirits, and all of them were healed...

One of the forgotten - or perhaps overlooked - facets of Ralph Vaughan Williams was his early affinity with Christian Socialism. He shared this with Percy Dearmer, and others. The agenda was social change. In a recent article by Katie Palmer Heathman - called "Lift Up a Living Nation": Community and Nation, Socialism and Religion in *The English Hymnal*, 1906 - she points out that the lead editors of *The English Hymnal* (1906), Percy Dearmer and Ralph Vaughan Williams, found Victorian hymnody in need of serious revision, and not just aesthetically. This musical book was intended as an expression of the editors' Christian socialist politics involving in the participation of the congregation.

Heathman's article examines how they achieved this by the encouragement of 'active citizenship' through communal music-making, using folksong tunes alongside texts which affirmed community. She argues that the editors wedded religion and high-quality music with a focus on citizenship drawn from British Idealism; using a cultural movement to seek social change.

We are gathered here today close to the Feast of St. Bartholomew, and in a year when we celebrate that most noble enterprise, the National Health Service, commemorates its 70th anniversary. We sometimes forget that our beloved NHS is directly rooted in the kind of Christian Socialism advocated by Ralph Vaughan Williams. And we forget, in turn, that this is rooted in earlier church history, and in the New Testament. Let me illustrate this with a local reference - local to me, anyway. Tucked away in a hidden corner of East Oxford, behind the Cowley Road in the direction of what was once ancient marshland, is a house and chapel built for the seclusion of lepers.

The (St Bartholomew's) Bartlemas chapel and the adjacent Bartlemas hospital was endowed by King Henry I back in 1126 so that the terrible threat of leprosy could be safely excluded from the city of Oxford. Infectious diseases of all kinds were common enough in mediaeval Europe, but the 12th and 13th centuries saw an unprecedented rise in leprosy right across Western Europe as crusading knights returning from the Holy Land brought newer and nastier threats to the public health of our island community.

The official response was a mixture of pity and horror. For all that some wealthy and influential patrons tried to ensure a minimum of decent care for the sick, there were many others who went along with those primitive feelings of disgust and revulsion that led to a systematic rejection of the most vulnerable members of the community, who were ostracised to the very margins. Way out in the marshlands, far beyond the city walls.

Sadly, the church went along with this policy of exclusion. Following literally the injunctions of *Leviticus 13*, the church required anyone suspected of contracting leprosy to present themselves to a priest. If the leprosy was confirmed, the person was pronounced legally dead, cut off from society, and dispossessed of all their material wealth.

You can find in the archives, the details of a special ritual which accompanied the process of social banishment. It was presided over by the church in a chilling liturgy called "The Mass of Separation". The unclean person is led out to the leprosarium after the fashion of a funeral procession. Typically the victim is then formally clothed with a simple set of leper's garments, basic everyday utensils and a begging bowl. Sometimes they are actually forced to stand in a coffin for the duration of the rite. The priest then reads out the binding admonition that will finally sever all links with the wider community:

I forbid you ever to enter a church, a monastery, a fair, a mill, a market or an assembly of people. I forbid you to leave your house unless dressed in your recognisable garb and also shod. I forbid you to wash your hands or to launder anything or to drink at any stream or fountain, unless using your own barrel or dipper. I forbid you to touch anything you buy or barter for, until it becomes your own.

I forbid you to enter any tavern; and if you wish for wine, whether you buy it or it is given to you, have it funnelled into your keg. I forbid you to share house with any woman but your wife. I command you, if accosted by anyone while travelling on a road, to set yourself down-wind of them before you answer. I forbid you to enter any narrow passage, lest a passer-by bump into you. I forbid you, wherever you go, to touch the rim or the rope of a well without donning your gloves. I forbid you to touch any child or give them anything. I forbid you to drink or eat from any vessel but your own.

And all this in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Ghost. A Christian response to leprosy? Really?

Our own history teaches that fear, horror, and primitive dread, in any society (whether ancient or modern, eastern or western) can provoke the cruellest reflex responses to fellow human beings who have the misfortune to represent some loathsome threat to the wellbeing of the community. Tainted. Unclean. Excluded. Lepers. These were some of the ugly dynamics faced by Jesus.

Then, as now, the identity politics that played out between powerful groupings in religion and society took a particularly cruel toll on some of the most vulnerable people. Lepers ejected to the margins, were made to represent in their tainted identity the fears and forebodings of a whole community uneasy with itself.

Let me close with an illustration of how healing might work for us today. Miroslav Volf is a theologian who takes the ministry of Jesus and first Christians as his model, and describes the power of reconciling, redeeming love in terms of a movement from exclusion to embrace. Here, there is a basic, very beautiful dynamic for us all to practise as Christians: the movement from exclusion to embrace.

This is something that Ralph Vaughan Williams understood. Profoundly. Ralph Vaughan Williams served as an ambulance driver in the Great War. He risked life and limb for maimed and mangled. His life and work - also reflected in his music and hymnody - was an extension of his politics and faith. His *Hymnal* was an attempt to forge a new kind of inclusivity, embracing all of society, and not just the privileged few. He was for the many.

So, let me close with an invitation: what would it mean for us to be inclusive and embracing in our faith? Bruce Barton wrote this short piece, “There are Two Seas” 1928; it was reprinted in the *Reader’s Digest* in 1946:

There are two seas in Palestine. One is fresh, and fish are in it. Splashes of green adorn its banks. Trees spread their branches over it and stretch out their thirsty roots to sip of its healing waters. Along its shores the children play as children played when He was there. He loved it. He could look across its silver surface when He spoke His parables. And on a rolling plain not far away He fed five thousand people. The river Jordan makes this sea with sparkling water from the hills. So it laughs in the sunshine. And men build their houses near to it, and birds their nests; and every kind of life is happier because it is there.

The river Jordan flows on south into another sea. Here no splash of fish, no fluttering of leaf, no song of birds, no children’s laughter. Travellers choose another route, unless on urgent business. The air hangs heavy above its water, and neither man nor beast nor fowl will drink. What makes this mighty difference in these neighbour seas? Not the river Jordan. It empties the same good water into both. Not the soil in which they lie; not the country round about.

This is the difference. The Sea of Galilee receives but does not keep the Jordan. For every drop that flows into it another drop flows out. The giving and receiving go on in equal measure. The other sea is shrewder, hoarding its income jealously. It will not be tempted into any generous impulse. Every drop it gets, it keeps. The Sea of Galilee gives and lives. The other sea gives nothing. It is named The Dead. There are two kinds of people in the world. There are two seas in Palestine.

The Very Revd. Prof. Martyn Percy, Dean, Christ Church, Oxford, August 2018