

30 July 2017

Seventh Sunday after Trinity



And he said to them “Every scribe who has been trained for the Kingdom of Heaven is like the master of a household who brings out of his treasure what is new and what is old.”

Matthew 13:52

These words were written by the author of Matthew’s Gospel as a statement of his own role as a scribe of the Kingdom of Heaven. Matthew sees himself and all other Christian interpreters as bringing out new realities to be found in the Jewish scriptures in the light of the life of Jesus Christ. The new approach would become, of course unacceptable to the Jewish authorities and eventually they stamped down on the infant Christian movement and banished it from the synagogues in a persecution which led to the martyrdom of Stephen, the first Christian martyr.

However, I do like the image of the scribe as someone who brings out of his treasure what is new and what is old. The phrase has something of a folksy ring about it – something old, something new, something borrowed, something blue – and it fits in with how we are fixed in our own generation as Christians. And yet, the truth it presents us with is neither comforting nor cosy.

The Old.

We today have problems gaining access to the old things in our treasury. We have difficulties accessing both the Old Testament and the New Testament. We have difficulties accessing the spiritual traditions and disciplines of prayer which were so important to our forebears in the faith. We have difficulties drawing on the insights of great writers and thinkers who enlightened the Christian search in the past. The difficulties stretch from the kind of language in which they wrote, which is quite different to our own language. We also have difficulties in our attitude- well, you know, can we actually be bothered to look at it. Can I see it on my mobile phone? Is there a Kindle version of it? Do I have time, because I have a lot of tv to catch up with this week? Can I be bothered?

The New.

We have problems understanding where our future lies as individuals and as a church. The various signposts are there, but which direction shall we take?

For virtually the whole of the Christian Church in the western world, our vision for the future is clouded by financial, intellectual and moral uncertainties.

So, why do we have problems like this?

The reasons are, of course, complex. Some have identified the turning point for confidence in the Christian Church as happening in the mid-19th century when the controversies about religion and science seemed to swing decisively in favour of the scientific interpretation of life, rather than the religious interpretation. The controversies over the work of Charles Darwin seemed to throw the Church off balance and it has been in a defensive posture ever since. The rise and rise of the “Scientist” (as they are so frequently described in the news bulletins) seems endless and religious commentators are now asked to speak only rarely when any great issues are under discussion.

Then there is the rise of the extremists of all religions who divide the world into two camps: those who feel attracted by the security and certainty of the extremes and those who feel repelled by the same qualities. For example, Christians and others feel afraid of extreme Islamists and what they would do to our society if they were ever to gain the upper hand. Muslims feel afraid of the decadence and lack of respect for life which the decline in Christian culture has bred in Western society.

The result of these considerations is that we Christians do seem to be at a turning point in western society. This turning point is deeply associated with the crisis of confidence in the traditions and theology of the Christian Church. Both old and new. What we need is to renew our contact with the old treasures and once more find in them the rich support for a Christian vision for life and so we will then be able to inform ourselves about future directions. I believe that the support is there, if only we were willing to reach into it and draw from it. This is a complicated matter and will require a fresh approach from leadership and a determination by Christians to learn and reflect on their learning.

I also believe that the Church of England is a potentially a sleeping giant, awaiting an awakening. The faith which we inherit is richly human in its values and deeply sympathetic in its vision of God. It is founded on faith and open to reason and change. We have within our grasp some of the greatest treasures to be found in the story of humanity in the life and words of Jesus of Nazareth. Let us not allow these treasures to go unnoticed or slip away unused by this generation.

Let us make the time and space to reach out for them and benefit from them.

Reverend Neil Richardson