

## Locating God?

All Souls, Halifax

Final Service

Sunday 6 September 2009

More than twenty years ago now I found myself on a train out of King's Cross for Alnmouth in Northumberland. I was bound for my annual retreat at the hermitage at Shepherd's Law high up on the moors outside Alnwick. As we went through the marshalling yards in Hornsey in north London I did as I always did. I looked back to view my school from the train window. It was always easily visible perched on the next hill into London from Alexandra Palace where BBC television started its life.

I looked, but in vain. There instead was a huge gap, a chasm between the houses. Two weeks later I learnt that the school, which I knew had closed down, had also been razed to the ground. I felt a huge sense of loss, of sadness. It cut at my heart. It was almost a feeling of bereavement. Part of my birthright had gone, it seemed. For most of us place is hugely important. It is equally significant for our faith. Let me recount one other very different experience – this time in Northumberland itself.

It was 1968, a Lambeth Conference year. Bishops were gathered from across the world. Amongst all this half a dozen bishops, led by the then Bishop of Newcastle, crossed the sands to the Holy Island of Lindisfarne with five thousand others for a great celebration eucharist. The preacher was that uncomfortable prophet and doughty fighter against apartheid, Trevor Huddleston, a monk of Mirfield in this diocese.

It was a powerful occasion and many were marked by it. Vocations were confirmed; others felt called to fight for and live out the life for which Jesus died. It was powerful because so many were there; it was powerful because Huddleston's sermon was troubling, disturbing; but it was perhaps most powerful of all because of where we are. Here we were in the place of Aidan the great missionary and of Cuthbert that pioneer of holiness in Northumbria. Yet, no sign of the wooden monastery and hermitages of either saint was visible. Even the mediaeval priory which succeeded Aidan and Cuthbert's church was now but a noble and fragmenting ruin. The event spoke then of Christianity past – which still spoke powerfully to us – and also of Christianity present and future. It was important to gather *there*. Yes, make no mistake, places matter.

There is no getting away from it that on one level today is a sad day, a day of farewells and memories. In our eucharistic prayer we shall speak of all that God has given here and of all we have known. We will give thanks for this church's care and witness, its faithfulness and its love; for those here today and for those from the past. Indeed, today is the end of part of a longer story. It began with Colonel Akroyd and his desire that God should be worshipped in Akroydon, the new town or village that had been born. It would be foolish – even wrong – not to mourn for what has gone before and for what has been lost.

But our faith and indeed today's scriptures cannot leave us there. The beginning of that piece of prophecy from Isaiah is remarkable: 'Be strong, do not fear; your God will come, he will come with vengeance; with divine retribution he will come to save you.' Despite all that Israel had experienced, God's sovereignty, God's power over the universe exercised through God's love and grace, is in no doubt. Trevor Huddleston, whom I mentioned earlier, saw such prophecy as the clarion call to God's church now. In his great book *Nought For Your Comfort* he quoted an earlier passage from Isaiah: 'Woe unto them that join house to house, that lay field to field, till there be no more *place* and ye be made to dwell alone in the midst of the land.'

There is that word *place* again. We are not created to dwell alone, without a place in his world. God cares about place, but he cares too about what we, through his grace, may do about the place he has given us. In a quite different way, the gospel passage also declares God's unfailing sovereignty and love. That couplet of stories of the Syrophoenician woman and of the deaf mute sees God working through Jesus in his world in each and every place and amongst every people.

There is an extraordinary and hopeful irony about today. For alongside our sadness of passing this morning stands another celebration of God's past work this afternoon. Here, 150 years after it was built we shall go into Scott's great church next door, with its spire pointing to the heavens and to God's sovereignty over his universe. It must be a forward-looking celebration. How can we imaginatively, alongside the Church's Conservation Trust, the local community and others, help All Souls Haley Hill still proclaim something of the gospel in whose name it was built? Moreover, how will you continue to proclaim the Gospel? Perhaps you will not meet for worship in this form again – but God will have plans for each of you. What is your *place* in his plans?

So let us allow our tears to flow, let us give thanks for all that has been offered here to God. But even in our sadness let us look forward and follow the great spire pointing us on: 'Be strong, do not fear; your God will come, he will come to save you.'

Amen.

Readings:

Isaiah 35. 4-7a

Mark 7. 24-end