



Sermon preached at William Temple Parish Church, Wythenshawe

by the Rev'd Canon Dr Chris Ford

Sunday 11th January 2015

When this church was built fifty years ago you could meet many people who had met William Temple. You could shake the hand of someone who had shaken Temple's hand, look into the eyes of someone who had seen Temple, listen to someone who had heard Temple preach. Many of these were people who had been confirmed by Temple when he was Bishop of Manchester. Some were priests who remembered him, one telling me about his infectious laugh.

And it was in London as an ordinand that I was a bag carrier for a senior clergyman who knew him. The priest had just had an operation and I accompanied him on the tube across London. We walked to the end of the platform and while waiting noticed the advertisements on the other side of the track. The priest had been a missionary in India before the Second World War. The advertisement facing us was for a guru of one of the many eastern meditation schools that had sprung up in the 1970s. He made a remark which was something along the lines that it was not surprising they were attempting to do in Britain what we had done to them in India. He spoke then about his work in India and concluded by saying that when he came back he arranged to meet William Temple who was then Archbishop of Canterbury. Temple appreciated when he had done and said at the conclusion of the conversation 'Well we must find a job for you'. 'And then' the priest continued 'shortly after he died'. We maintained a period of silence. Partly I guess in remembrance for the job that never was, and partly a kind of act of remembrance for the great man.

Then the silence was taken apart by the rumble of the train coming through the tunnel, and then the gust of air whose odour is unique to the London underground and then that rush as the train bursts out of the tunnel on to the platform. We stepped into the carriage and found ourselves in the company of strangers. And the train and our lives moved on.

Much like the baptism of Christ. That tearing apart, that rumble of the heavens, and then that gust of air, that descent of the Spirit. And so it was at our baptism. Every baptism is as dramatic. When any one of us is baptised, we may not hear it or see it, but the heavens open with a roar and the gust of the Spirit descends upon us. And where do we go from there? Well we are not part of some individualistic school of contemplation, not for us navel gazing. Nope when we are baptised there is a train which rushes in and

collects us, called the church, we have no choice of our fellow passengers and what a bunch they are.

It is remarkable that experience of stepping into, sometimes tumbling into, a tube train or a tram. You fall through the door and a load of faces turn towards you and look you up and down. And you look back at them. A bit like a new clergyperson arriving in a parish.

Indeed it was having got off a train at Wilmslow station that I first met my prospective incumbent. In his letter to me he gave a typically self-deprecating description. 'Look for a diminutive figure on the platform'. And there he was, Canon Tom Evans. And from there the weekend end tour of the parish, coming into this incredibly modern church and it being pointed out, "See those girders rising up from the baptismal font, they hold up the church, to symbolise baptism being the sacrament which holds up the church" and of course meeting the people.

Around that same time I had a conversation with a Jesuit priest who had recently been imprisoned in Chile after the coup. I asked him how he felt when he had been arrested, wasn't he mad at the hierarchy for allowing him to be treated like that simply because he had worked with the poor. Was he not mad at the church? He looked at me and said six words which have run as a thread through my ministry ever since. "It's the people who save you".

It's the people who save you. A reminder that when we are ordained as a deacon or priest we are not ordained to promulgate a dry ideology. We are ordained to be a pastor, a shepherd of the flock. And every single person who is baptised is baptised into a living, vital collection of people. And yes it's as random and diverse a group of people in any congregation as you get in any train carriage. That's both the risk and joy of being part of the body of Christ. But the people stick in your mind. As I look down this church I see your faces, and I see other faces. Ones long passed, but every one of them a baptised person who was part of God's redemptive plan for his people, people who were part of God's plan not just to save me but to save the world - the people who save.

And to see those faces from the past reminds us that the church is made up not only of the living but the departed. Gathering for this Eucharist today I am reminded once again of those words from a John Betjeman poem 'The house of rest' about a clergy widow surrounded by photos of departed members the family

Now when the bells for Eucharist
Sound in the Market Square,
With sunshine struggling through the mist
And Sunday in the air

The veil between her and her dead
Dissolves and show them clear,
The consecration prayer is said
And all of them are near.

John Betjeman that great English poet that great Anglican. William Temple that great Anglican, that great Bishop of Manchester, Archbishop of York and Archbishop of Canterbury. William Temple who many still view as that great symbiosis of the integrity of Anglicanism, loyalty to both word and sacrament, concern for evangelism but also to social justice, pursuing the passion of the heart as much as the reason of the mind. A man whose premature death made people still feel a great sense of loss twenty years after his death and therefore consecrate a church bearing his name. A church which this year celebrates fifty years of witness to this community, and today we give all give thanks for the way this place has touched us. Renewed in faith we step out into all the world once again to go and baptise in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit and to reassure a sometimes broken and frightened world that our unity and hope lies with Jesus and Jesus is with us to the end of the age.