

A TIME TO PLANT
St Michael's Cornhill
Sung Eucharist
Sunday 24th January Epiphany 3
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Who I wonder might have been next to you if you had been worshipping here two thousand years ago? Well, it might have been the Roman prefect in charge of Londinium. It might have been a senior engineer in charge of the hypocausts heating the Forum. It might have been a business man running a retail outlet near the centre of the City or in the shadow of the City walls, next to what we now call Moorgate. There'd have been no sidesmen – and I say *men* for it remained a patriarchal society. Maybe a squad of six legionaries would have been detailed for the day to order the service or the gathering for sacrifice.

Whatever the precise details, it's more than likely that precisely on this spot there'll have been some sort of gathering throughout the year for two thousand years. For we are meeting on just the same site as that of the basilica of the Roman Forum. It's quite likely that religious worship has been happening on this site for two millennia. Of course, such worship would have made the establishment of the Church of England feel like 'tame stuff'. For our Queen may be the *Supreme Governor* of the Church of England, but we would not even imagine worshipping her, as the Romans did *their* Emperor. This would have been a basilica, a temple for the worship of Caesar.

All this in itself is a significance starting point as we reflect upon this great City early on in a new year. The resonances of this place, however, do not end with the collapse of the Roman Empire. I've already alluded to the possible continuity of religious worship. But this part of the City has always been pivotal. The name *Cornhill* adverts to the commercial centre that this was in the Middle Ages. In 1381, the leaders of the so-called Peasants' Revolt came down Cornhill on their way to Smithfield, followed hotfoot by the youthful King Richard II.

In the reign of the first Elizabeth, the Royal Exchange, just outside here, was built, another sign of businesses and commerce. In the reign of another queen who gave her name to an era, this Exchange was rebuilt – in Victorian times. Just next door, in the eighteenth century was established the first coffee house in London, patronised doubtlessly by the great, and sometimes, choleric Dr Johnson. Out of meetings in such places grew Lloyd's of London and much more in terms of shipping and finance. In the nineteenth century Charles Dickens refers more than once to Cornhill and St Michael's in his most seasonal of novels, *A Christmas Carol*.

I hardly need to press this point home for our present age with the Bank of England on our doorstep. Then, just yards away are the powerful signs of commerce in the 'cheese grater', the 'walkie talkie', Tower 42 and many other flagship commercial buildings. So the point about business is easily made. But how about religion? After all, I began by demonstrating how religion and civic life were entirely integrated in the Roman imperium, the Pax Romana.

Our three readings may offer some indicators here. That first reading from Ecclesiastes, often used at funerals and indeed at other milestone events issues from the Old Testament, the Hebrew Bible, as it were, the foundational documents of Judaism. It issues from the *wisdom* tradition, from what one scholar used to call the 'grammar school boys of the Old Testament.' At times the writer, variously called the *Preacher*, the *Speaker* or Koheleth in Hebrew can feel world-weary. But ultimately his quotidian reflections are rooted in Judaism's worship of God. There are times for 'everything under heaven'. Out of all those different times – a time to weep, a time to laugh, a time to seek, a time to lose - perhaps in this most commercial of cities we should focus today on 'a time to plant.

The soil of our contemporary world does not always seem the most fertile for planting. Instability internationally and most notably in the Middle East, falling oil prices, a wobbliness in our commitment to Europe. Nonetheless both the Jewish and Christian scriptures have nourished a commitment to a work ethic and to a world productive through the power of God's grace.

The danger of infertility in the contemporary soil of business and international relations directs us to our second reading, that great parable of Jesus from St Matthew's Gospel. Often it is used rather sentimentally: 'When I was hungry you gave me food, when I was naked you clothed me, when I was in prison you visited me.' I've even heard it used to support donations to Dogs' Homes and Donkey Sanctuaries! Worthy though such causes are, the parable is deeper and darker than that. For it is a parable of judgement. It is a warning of the consequences of a lack of care for others, a lack of honouring of community.

So coming to worship today, we celebrate all that is a gift from God, but we are challenged to use those gifts for the good of all and for the glory of God. That's a very powerful challenge at the beginning of a year and it loses any importance the minute we forget our dependence on God.

Amen

Readings

II Corinthians 6. 1-10.

Ecclesiastes 3, 1-13.

Matthew 25. 31-46.