

## BETRAYAL, TRUST, FAITH AND HOPE

St Michael's, Cornhill

Sunday October 5<sup>th</sup> 2014

Trinity XV

On the eighteenth April 1956, the *S.S. Ordzhonikidze* arrived in Portsmouth Harbour. It brought with it a prestigious cargo, including one Nikita Krushchev, then effectively President of the Soviet Union and Nikolai Bulganin, his Premier. Most imprudently during the vessel's stay, MI6 persuaded Lionel 'Buster' Crabbe to investigate the ship's propeller; Crabbe was an accomplished frogman. Crabbe never resurfaced and it caused an international incident in the midst of the Cold War.

Crabbe's demise appears as something of a sideshow in Ben MacIntyre's recent book, *A Spy Among Friends*. It is an amazingly revealing book and a great read. The central character is Kim Philby, a double agent from 1934 to 1963. Alongside him were others – Burgess and MacLean and Anthony Blunt. Philby was remarkable in terms of both his plausibility and his gift for friendship. His charisma meant that both his British MI6 colleague, Nicholas Elliot and his American C.I.A. associate, James Angleton remained friends with him all the way through to his disappearance from Beirut in 1963. They trusted him implicitly, as indeed did his three wives!

MacIntyre's book is not only informative and readable. It is telling because of its insight into Philby's extraordinary personality and internal logic. From Cambridge in the 1930s and onwards, Philby became a convinced Marxist-Leninist and thereafter never doubted that creed nor the rectitude of all things Soviet. Indeed such was his conviction that despite all the macabre signs from the USSR, he *never* questioned his conviction. It was an odd intellectual blindness from such a clever man.

MacIntyre's book is compelling but also depressing. For his intellectual blindness, combined with his gift of friendship, meant that even his closest friends never doubted his integrity. Elliot and Angleton could hardly believe it, once the truth of Philby's complicity and treachery were revealed. It was an issue of betrayal of trust at the deepest possible level. The unquestioning friendship of Elliot and Angleton meant that they were complicit with the death of hundreds, maybe even thousands of British and American agents. Do read the book. It is almost compulsory if we are to understand more about the roots and essence of our humanity.

But why dwell on this story this morning? What could it speak of the Christian gospel? Our three readings make that explicit and clear. Isaiah's image of the vineyard is one of the most powerful and compelling images in the Old Testament. It speaks of Israel's betrayal of its own mission, of its own indelible divinely given character. For Isaiah's tale of the vineyard is a tale of Israel's perfidy and loss of vision. Our gospel, presumably having Isaiah's tale in mind, has a similar message. Here, in hardly veiled terms, we see how Jesus is deserted by both friends and 'fellow travellers'. Even those closest to him will betray him. It is both a sad and terrifying tale.

Essential to our humanity is the virtue of *trust*. When someone utters something to you or me as an individual, or to us as a society, it is crucial that we can depend on it. If each of us told lies regularly or even intermittently, life would be unliveable. We could not even rely on the basic facts of our existence, colour, location, direction and action – all would become relative, or even worse, completely unpredictable. How could we ever know how or when to believe someone?

But it was just this foundational truth of our existence that was undermined by Philby. Even those he admired and loved the most were traduced by his perfidy. His charisma and personality betrayed even his closest friends. It was a deadly cocktail.

We see something precisely the same in the story of Jesus. Ultimately the key moment in the tale is that of Judas. An apparently charismatic and determined character, perhaps a zealot even, is prepared to betray, to hand over (as the Greek would have it) Jesus. Others of Jesus' disciples behave less than loyally. The denials of Peter are retold by the gospel writers with both pathos and power.

These key instincts about trust and fidelity are woven into the grain of our human character through the grace of God. Trust is essential for the true functioning of our society, but it is in meagre supply. The past four weeks which covered the Scottish referendum revealed that in a chilling way. For Christian believers, trust lies at the heart of the word faith. Faith requires trust. God in Jesus offers us good reason to trust. We are called to offer a similar integrity. But faith is also an essential element in sustaining hope. Remove faith and hope disappears. Remove faith and the threadbare nature of trust in our contemporary world is revealed.

In Jesus, we see the ultimate in trust, faith and hope. Jesus knows that God is the only creator, redeemer and sustainer of hope. That is what we too are called to live. Without it our society will wither and die; our world will shrivel and decay. With trust, faith and hope, the future can be embraced – but it begins with *trust*. Can we as a community live and sustain that?

Amen

Readings:

Isaiah 5. 1-7.

Philippians. 3. 4b-14

Matthew. 21. 33-end.