

**A PRIESTHOOD FOREVER**  
**St. George's, Wash Common**  
**Last Sunday After Trinity**  
**Sunday, October 25<sup>th</sup> 2015**  
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What have Scotland Yard, Roker Park (where Sunderland used to play) and this lovely church of St. George in common? Well, in case you think I've substituted a 'pub quiz' for a sermon, let me come clean straightaway and give you the answer. Norman Shaw who was the architect for the Scotland Yard building on the Embankment; Edward Prior who designed St. Andrews, Roker next to Sunderland's old ground, and F.C. Eden who designed this beautiful church were all members of the *Art Workers' Guild*.

The *Guild* had been established by a group of British architects who had been inspired by William Morris, Philip Webb, Edward Burne-Jones and others who were founders of the Arts and Crafts Movement. Members of both these groups were remarkable, for they were not 'jobbing architects' - either out to make a quick buck, nor indeed wanting to fabricate a workaday building in as short a time as possible. Beauty and care were the watchwords. William Morris famously wrote: 'Have nothing in your house that you do not know to be useful or believe to be beautiful.'

Their work transformed architecture, for it was rooted in their vision of a new world, a world transformed. Morris had been brought up as a Catholic Anglican, and he was an early Christian Socialist.

Now I've begun here, since all three of our readings offer visions of a new world. Maybe they have been chosen for this last Sunday after Trinity to herald the new world we shall welcome in at Advent? Our first reading from Jeremiah is a cry of hope from Israel in exile. The prophet notes: 'The Lord has saved his people, the remnant of Israel. "I will gather them from the farthest point of the earth", he promises.

The Letter to the Hebrews offers a unique message in the New Testament, for it uses the imagery of Israel's *High Priesthood* to portend a new world. The old priesthood is abolished. Jesus is the unique new high priest heralding a new world. It is Jesus, the high priest who is himself sacrificed: 'He holds his priesthood forever', we are told ... 'so he is able for all time to save those who draw near to God through him.'

Finally, in that snippet from Mark's Gospel, we hear the story of blind Bartimaeus. Through Jesus, he receives his sight. The story is deliberately ambiguous. For Bartimaeus now can literally see the beauty of God's world which before he knew not. But also, in Jesus, a new world is inaugurated: 'Go your way, your faith has made you whole.'

It's sometimes difficult to get the measure of this new world, in all its remarkable fulness, as established in Christ Jesus. What image might capture it? Well, some of you here will remember the collapse of Communism in Eastern Europe and the USSR. It was remarkable – made the easier by the broadcast media of course. Captives could now *see* another world or *hear* of it. The Berlin Wall both literally and metaphorically collapsed. Christians in East Germany were catalysts for this great liberation. They opened their churches to the freedom fighters.

I went out to Germany just after this momentous event to improve my German. Klaus, my Lutheran friend who hosted me, found a spanner in his car boot and we chipped off bits of concrete from the crumbling wall. We became *Mauerspecks*, *wall-peckers* as the Germans labelled us. I've still kept my piece of wall in a little box at home. It's a tiny symbol of that new world, partly made possible by people's faith in Jesus.

Sometimes we fail to see how radically exciting, different, world-changing the Christian Gospel is. It's been going for two thousand years and we've made it feel rather ordinary, workaday, commonplace, unremarkable. But that's a travesty of the truth. Some five or six years ago David Bentley-Hart, an Orthodox theologian wrote a book sub-titled *The Christian Revolution and its Fashionable Enemies*.

He showed just how revolutionary Christianity was, and why it eventually spread like wildfire in the ancient world. Paganism was a *very sad* religion: Christianity brought liberation from fatalism; it conferred great dignity on human beings; it subverted the most cruel aspects of the Pagan world; it elevated charity or love above all virtues. Christianity brought hope to a hopeless world. With the tiniest amount of imagination, it still does.

How easy it is for us to be fatalist ourselves - with the woes of war, the poison of poverty, the sin of enslavement. Each of our readings today heralds hope – the remnant saved, a new high priesthood for all humanity to share, sight for the blindness of a world lacking faith. So, God gathers us from the *uttermost parts of the earth*. Christ's priesthood *saves all who draw near to God*. Go your way, *your faith has made you whole*. What a breathtaking call, as we herald the Advent of Jesus Christ. Amen

#### Readings

Jeremiah. 31. 7-9.

Hebrews. 7. 23-end.

Mark. 10. 46-52.