

WHO DO YOU SAY I AM?

Trinity XV

Sung Eucharist,

St. Michael, Cornhill

Sunday, September 13th 2015

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Nürnberg or Nuremberg, in south eastern Germany is one of the great cultural centres of Bavaria. In both the churches of the city itself and in the towns nearby – Würzburg, Ochsenfurt, Dinkelsbühl and others – you will encounter the work of Albrecht Dürer, the great artist and engraver, and then also the great wood carver, Tilman Riemenschneider, the German equivalent of our Grinling Gibbons. Many other great artists of the medieval and early modern period are there too. Dürer's House is open daily to visitors.

If you travel to the south eastern suburbs of the city, however, to Luitpold Park you will find very different cultural remains. For here, dominated by the 'Grosse Strasse', the Great Road – two kilometres long, forty metres wide and made of granite slabs each more than a metre square – here, are the remains of the Nazi parade grounds designed by Hitler's architect, Albert Speer, and others. The Zeppelinfeld, near its centre was the scene of the Nuremberg rallies. It could accommodate in total some 200,000 people with a vast grandstand at the centre of which was the Führer's podium.

In this place, Hitler propounded his apocalyptic and evil vision. Hateful as it was, sadly, it spoke to the worst elements of humanity. The German people, humiliated by the Treaty of Versailles at the end of the Great War, further humiliated by the failure of the Weimar Republic and with it the galloping inflation that engulfed the country heard in this great arena just the words they wanted to hear. Hitler's message was predictable and fed people's worst possible instincts. Of course, tyrants and dictators still trade in this way now. More worrying for us, even in our own country, some of our newspapers feed readers with a selfish and consuming vision which is all too satisfying to the selfishness of the human soul.

But, what we have heard in these past few minutes – from both the Old and New Testaments could hardly stand in greater contrast to this repellent sort of doctrine. Each of our readings, you may have noticed, was about *teaching* – that's just what Hitler and his cohorts thought they were doing. But what we have heard flies in the face of such selfish and brutal dreams. So, Isaiah begins: 'The Lord has given me the tongue of a teacher', but the teacher's message seems perverse to any instinct of selfishness or self-preservation. The prophet sets out a model and a pattern: 'I gave my back to the smiters', he writes, 'I turned my cheek to those who pulled at my beard. I hid my face from insult and spitting.' It is a pattern of self-giving, of service to the community.

None of this, of course, reflects the blame society which we so often encounter where the first thought that is encountered is: 'I've been misdealt with, mishandled. How do I claim compensation, how can I now profit from all this? How can I do better for *myself*?' Isaiah's model undoubtedly runs against the general trend of human instincts of self-preservation. We see that even more vividly again in the Gospel reading in Jesus. Jesus asks his followers: 'Who do *you* say I am?' Peter replies: 'You are the Messiah.'

In response, Jesus offers an apparently perverse and unattractive model of a Messiah: 'The Son of Man must undergo great suffering, be rejected by the establishment and finally killed.' It's an unattractive picture and it's no wonder Peter doesn't like it. Yet it's a model which is repeated three times in chapters eight, nine and ten of Mark's gospel. It's picked up by Matthew and Luke – and John too in his own way tells, of course, the same story. It was no more attractive to Jesus' followers then, than it is now. We read of Peter's reaction to

Jesus: 'Peter took Jesus aside and began to rebuke him.' Jesus returns the rebuke very sharply.

So, the gospel message runs almost exactly counter to most popular opinion. Indeed it stands almost in total contrast to a world seeking someone to blame, someone to milk via the courts for compensation. So much of this is being played out in our world *now* before our eyes. For we face, at present, a situation nothing less than that faced by the failing Roman Empire at the beginning of the fifth century. Then, as now thousands – perhaps millions of people from different tribes – Goths, Ostrogoths, Vandals, Saxons and so on flooded into Europe seeking a better life, richer crops, prosperity.

Our reactions have predictably been ambivalent. How can any country cope with mass immigration, how will it unbalance our own stability, what might it do to our standard of living? In contrast, politicians – from the Prime Minister and across the political spectrum – have appealed to all to show compassion and generosity in the face of human suffering some of which suffering we Western nations have helped contribute towards.

So, the counter-intuitive teaching of our readings of Isaiah and of Jesus himself, speaks powerfully to our condition. Harold Macmillan, writing reflectively in Assisi, in 1945 wrote:

'Hitler has lasted twelve years – with all his power of evil, his strength, his boasting. St Francis did not seem to have much power, but here in this lovely place one realises the immense strength and permanence of goodness.'

Macmillan, who himself had considered offering for ordination, saw the irony of power and gentleness. He saw the message behind Jesus' self-giving, death and resurrection. Today's readings, then, are indeed all about teaching, but they are about a very different sort of teaching from that of the tyrants, the selfish, the bully boys. That lesson from the Letter of James reminds anyone who would listen of the terrifying responsibility that lies in the hands of teachers. In Jesus, we see the essence of what the Gospel is both by his life and in his teaching. It went well beyond compassion and simple generosity to giving even his life-blood for all humanity.

In our present world the Gospel allows us no escape from the compassion and generosity that is called out of *us*. It's a powerful and challenging message we cannot ignore.

Amen

Readings

Isaiah. 50. 4-9a.

James. 3. 1-12.

Mark. 8. 27-38.