

REMOVING THE YOKE

Diocesan Festival- Diocese of Cyprus & the Gulf

All Hallows-by-the-Tower

Sung Eucharist

Monday July 30th 2016

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Let me begin somewhere to the east of your diocese, some thirteen years ago now. I was lecturing on the ship *Minerva* for the Swan Hellenic cruise line and we had just negotiated the famous, or even infamous, Straits of Hormuz as we entered the Arabian Gulf. It was the start of a cruise to almost all the Gulf states. We tied up at the Iranian part of Bandar Abbas. The next day was one that those of us who were there shall never forget. We were flown up to Shiraz and spent our day there and in Persepolis. The ruins of the civilisation there are, of course, remarkable. But it was the encounter with the culture which was equally amazing.

First of all, women in our party had to wear more clothing than at any other point on the cruise. They were clad from head to toe and in terrifyingly high temperatures. There was much unexpressed fear. This was the first time that *Minerva* had ever docked in Iran – and it was the last time to date that it has done so, as far as I know. It might be perilous now. Yet the welcome from local people – almost across the board – was startling. Forget politics, we were told. We are all part of one humanity, one person after another said to us. It was refreshing and encouraging in a manner which we could not have imagined.

Of course, since then we have entered another world, and I can't pretend that the western alliance has helped it to become a better world! The Iraqi and Libyan conflicts and our unwillingness to include Palestine as a sovereign state are all part of the equation. The tragic and ghastly events in France over the past fortnight have upped the stakes internationally. But I hardly need to tell you this – you continue to live through the heat of the day and at the eye of the storm.

There is a sense in which it was ever thus. For Bandar Abbas is first mentioned in relation to Darius of Persia whom we meet in the Old Testament in the book of Daniel. Daniel was written less than 150 years before the birth of Jesus, when Israel was being oppressed by yet another conqueror, this time, the Seleucid Emperor, Antiochus IV Epiphanes. But Daniel is written 'in code', to protect the fragile Jewish community. That code shifts all the drama three hundred years earlier to the Jewish exile under King Darius. This directs us to our first reading from Jeremiah.

For although Jeremiah was writing probably two hundred years before the Persian episode under Darius, the situation and atmosphere are not worlds apart. Both times see Israel in exile. The passage we heard from the prophet sounds like all those rather corny jokes about 'some good news and some bad news!' As elsewhere in Jeremiah's writing, we encounter a potent image. This time it's a yoke, as in oxen's. Hananiah removes the wooden yoke bars from Jeremiah's neck, but then only a few sentences later, we hear the Lord God utter: 'I have put upon the neck of all these nations, an *iron yoke* of servitude to Nebuchadnezzar, the King of Babylon.' The troubles and trials for Israel will continue – perhaps even increase.

Some twenty five years ago now I prepared a whistle-stop tour of the Holy Land for the recently appointed Archbishop of Canterbury. One day in Jerusalem included no less than fourteen engagements, ranging from meeting the Mayor, Teddy Kollek, to meeting the Custos of the Holy Places, the Armenian Patriarch, the Greek Patriarch, the Latin Patriarch and so on. One by one we met with them, preceded by the traditional rhythmic thumping of the wooden stake upon the ground in Byzantine manner, as we eventually made our way to the then Prime Minister, Yitzhak Shamir.

It was a grim meeting – no compromise. (Little has changed since – if anything, matters are worse.) That first meeting, overshadowed further by the political complexities represented by the other personalities we'd met, did not augur well. There was a predominate feeling of gathering storm clouds – no sign of a wooden yoke, even, being broken. It would have been hard to feel any sense of encouragement had these experiences not been preceded by the journey into Israel from Jordan. We had flown in via Amman. There, amongst other things, we spent an hour with King Hussein of Jordan. Having admired him from my youth, I could hardly believe I was part of this tiny ensemble within his room in the Royal Palace. Despite the privations experienced by Palestinians, the King breathed generosity and hope.

Hope is perhaps the key word for us today. Our gospel reading is that dramatic tale of the 'stilling of the storm.' The embryonic community around Jesus are in peril of their lives. Jesus' presence and authority are at the heart of the tale. He brings hope which is immediately vindicated as the storm subsides. *Hope* is a precious and crucial word in Christian faith and theology. It is emphatically *not optimism* – expecting the best, as it were. In the light of the resurrection, *hope* is the *promise of redemption*. God in Christ will break not only the wooden yoke but the iron yoke too.

There is no promise of *cheap grace*! There will still be much to endure. As individuals and as a community we shall have the responsibility to be open to God's grace and to work with God as he establishes his Kingdom. In these troubled times, the hope we are given in Christ Jesus is the promise of triumph, but in God's time.

Amen.

Readings

Jeremiah 28

Matt 14. 22-end