

THE WELFARE OF THE CITY

St. Michaels, Cornhill

Trinity XX

Sung Eucharist

Sunday October 9th 2016

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Lloyd Grossman is one of those imported Englishmen who has brought significant gifts in the forty two years since he moved here – he first arrived in 1974. An accomplished celebrity chef, he has given his name to a well-reviewed brand of pasta sauces – his name is synonymous with good cuisine. But also, less well known, he has chaired the Churches' Conservation Trust for some five or six years now. That trust looks after church buildings no longer in use for regular worship but notable in their own right architecturally or historically. Often they are in isolated locations or cheek by jowl with other churches.

In a recent address to a mixed audience, Grossman reflected on this great city in which St. Michael's lies at the heart. He began with the Great Fire, in this 350th anniversary year. Before the fire, he noted, London was just one more city amongst many in Europe. Paris was bigger, as was Naples and at least two or three others. But, in the forty years after the fire, its growth was exponential. It would become the greatest city in the world, a position, Grossman noted, it has never relinquished. In the past forty years, he reflected, it has again experienced exponential growth and it is undoubtedly still the greatest city in the world! I'm sure that's true, but it was good to have an American to confirm it!

You don't have to look far to discover the extraordinary layering that has made London what it is. Down the road at the Bloomberg site, once again the Mithraic temple has been researched once again archeologically. Stand on the roof of Stationers' Hall and you can see layer after layer reaching down to the Roman wall around London. In this very building, we are standing over the site of the ancient Roman basilica of the Forum, built some eighteen hundred years ago.

Now I've begun here to reflect upon that final verse from our first reading from Jeremiah's prophecy: 'But seek the *welfare of the city*', he says, 'where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare.' It's an interesting reflection, and particularly if you place it alongside the St. Michael's prayer which we pray every week at the end of every eucharist:

'Christ look upon this city and keep our sympathy and pity fresh
and our faces heavenward, lest we grow hard.'

Since much of the narrative of the gospels is set in the hill country of Galilee, it's easy to ignore the impact that Jesus had on *cities* and indeed the impact which they had on him. Jesus prayed over the city of Jerusalem, a city where people's hearts would grow so hard as to cause them to crucify him. On the Mount of Olives, Jesus wept over the city. The writer of the Apocalypse, the final book of the Bible saw a vision of 'the heavenly city.' So, the Christian gospel is rooted as much in the corporate life of the city as anywhere else.

But what did Jeremiah mean when he called his hearers 'to seek the welfare of the city', where the Lord had sent them into exile. Now all of us here are far from exile in this 'world city' which is London, but still it's easy for committed Christian people now to feel a sense of exile. Churchgoing numbers have declined (although it's interesting to hear that numbers at cathedrals continues to rise); political correctness appears to marginalise Christianity; abuse scandals undermine people's trust – and so one could go on. But – as indeed Jeremiah makes clear, so it has always been.

So what should be our response? It's easy to strike either a defensive or a whinging pose. People are deliberately out to marginalise us, starting from elsewhere, or if only people were more loyal. But it struck me that Lloyd Grossman's words offer a much more nuanced, realistic and positive

stance. I've no idea what his religious stance might be – almost certainly he's Jewish. But his commitment to the Christian heritage of our city and our nation is enormously encouraging and is perhaps a sign to us too.

In our epistle reading just now, there followed a series of couplets, designed to root us in God. We heard: 'Therefore I endure everything for the sake of the elect, so that they may obtain the salvation that is in Christ Jesus, with eternal glory.' Then follow the couplets relating to Christ our Redeemer: 'If we have died with him, we will also *live* with him; if we endure we will also reign with him.' Even if we falter, Christ is there, for next we heard: 'if we are faithless, *he remains faithful* for he cannot deny himself.'

All this suggests a remarkable encouragement to us. God, in Christ Jesus remains faithful whatever. We are enjoined to do the same. So even with small numbers – and even smaller at weekday eucharists – we declare our faithfulness. As our strapline on our service books reminds us, we are called to be 'a soul for the City.' Rather in the same way, then, that religious communities pray ceaselessly, but live a hidden life, so that is our vocation at the heart of this great city, the greatest city in the world, even. Pray ceaselessly – if we endure, we shall reign with him – Christ look upon this city and keep pity fresh. Amen.

Readings

Jeremiah. 29. 1, 4-7.

II. Tim. 2. 8-15.

Luke. 17. 11-19