

SERMON AT ST MICHAEL'S CORNHILL – Sexagesima 2012

If you are old enough to remember those days I guess most of you will remember where you were on the day the death of George VI was announced in 1952.

I was at school, when the school caretaker, Harry Bailey, mouthed through the classroom window in the weaving shed argot much lampooned by such comedians as Norman Evans and Les Dawson, 't' King's died.'

There was a shocked silence for a moment, then tears.

A seemingly long period then ensued, with solemn music on the BBC and endless picture of the lying-in-state, and a two-minute silence on the day of the funeral.

I remember the latter because I stood with my grandmother in front of the wireless, not sure why we were doing this, but convinced that it was important to do it.

It was about this time that I was beginning to be drawn towards the Church.

The previous year I had been taken to the Festival of Britain, and besides being over-awed by the great hall at Euston, I was floored by St Paul's and the Abbey.

Introduced by a civilised mother to the aesthetic delights of cathedrals and ruins – she described herself as 'heathen' and was in reality a lapsed Anglican, I gradually responded to what I believe are the eternal verities behind the existence of the world.

There wasn't a great deal of assistance from the Church.

That body seemed to be obsessed with sales of work and 'socials' where rows of women sat with handbags in their lap and occasionally rose to dance the veleta together.

Hardly anyone went to church.

It was what a friend of mine aptly referred to as ‘potato pie religion.’

The daughter of the local shopkeeper, who worked somewhere ‘away’, was referred to as ‘very religious’ because she went to church every Sunday.

But I hung on, and by the time I was into my teens is was almost the only survivor of a cohort that had done the Sunday school, youth club and confirmation class circuit.

I was not aware of what possible reason there could be for this, unless it was the fact that I was insecure, naïve, gullible or all three.

And it is only now that I look back that I am able to discern something about the process which might offer an explanation.

I am not conscious that I was exposed to anything that scared me into failing to quit the Church.

Nor was I brought up in a religious environment.

Not the reverse, but certainly an apathetic or neutral one.

Somehow, the promptings of something, someone, beyond this world, stayed with me and eventually led me to embrace the faith and stay with it.

But why did so many of my peer group not stay with it?

Who knows.

Perhaps I ‘saw the point’ in a way that others did not.

When Jesus told the parable of the sower it was clear that the truth is self-evident to those who have seen the point and a mystery to those who have not.

He didn’t veil the truth from the many and disclosed it to the chosen few,

The secret of the Kingdom – what he came to disclose – was open for everyone to see and hear but even an open secret remains a secret from those who do not wish to learn it.

For the percipient the story would be seen to cohere with their own experience and journey.

For those who would not or could not get the point it was a story and nothing more.

The second half of the parable seems to be a homily of sound advice to new converts on the dangers of superficial enthusiasm, unstable faith and preoccupation with worldly affairs.

The rest of the episode, which is not included in today's reading basically reminds readers that when a light is kindled in a life it must be allowed to shine for the benefit of others.

God's revelation begins as a private discovery and ends as a public trust, which grows with sharing, and those who try to keep it for themselves find they have lost even what they thought they had.

We are all called to be hearers of this parable, and, indeed of all the teaching Jesus.

When the Gospel is read we surround it with a certain amount of circumstance.

We stand to hear it, and in many church its reading is accompanied with lights and incense.

Standing to hear the Gospel was abolished by the second Prayer Book of Edward VI but restored in 1662, presumably because it was recognised that the reading was a real encounter with Jesus of Nazareth, speaking to us in our own time.

It is directed towards us.

All of us.

We are all called to respond.

Again and again.

None of us is particularly privileged in a religious sense.

We are all forgiven sinners, but called, summoned by the One who Is, to recognise his presence, however dimly.

To see in Jesus of Nazareth the embodiment of this One who has created all that is.

Who loves us and deeply desires us.

Do we have fertility, the fecundity, to be faithful, diligent, recipient of the good news of God's love?

Or do we simply wish to keep everything that has been revealed to us to ourselves, using our membership of the Church as a means of sustaining shrunken, negative lives devoid of generosity of spirit?

Do we see the Eucharistic banquet simply as a reminder of the last sad meal Jesus shared with his disciples, or as a fresh, real outpouring of the unbounded love of God for us poor sinners?

There is a need for all of us to reflect seriously on our stories as disciples, not so that we can escape from the present or from reality, but so that we can as it were see the finger of God in our lives, beckoning, encouraging, disclosing.

Reflecting on things is important for all of us.

In a busy and often confusing world it is critically important if we are not to be seen as reactionary and negative.

We can learn from the past but we can't live in it.

God in Jesus is ever-present, and in this celebration we are literally fed with the body and blood of our Redeemer.

We are fertile ground where the good news can germinate, take root and grow, again and again.

If only we will let it.