

## **Chapel of St Peter and St Paul, Greenwich**

### **Second Sunday of Lent**

+In Nomine...

In November last year the Environment Agency published a policy paper reviewing the strategy for managing tidal flood risk in the Thames Estuary to the end of this century and beyond. Its findings were not surprising nor unexpected, but as we sit here in the chapel of the Royal Naval College, mere metres above historic high-water marks, it worth recalling some of its findings. First though, let's remember that the complex network of tidal defences, at the heart of which is the Thames tidal barrier, protects from flooding over £321 billion worth of property and 1.42 million people.

The Environment Agency notes that the mean sea level in the Thames Estuary has risen by approximately 15 cm between 1911 and 2018. It further notes that sea level rise in the estuary has accelerated over the last few decades - rising by about 1.4 mm per year between 1911 and 2018, versus 3.6 mm per year between 1990 and 2018. It then notes that even if we reach the government's required target of net zero by 2050 once-a-century sea level events are expected to become annual events.

It can be hard to grasp the magnitude of the changes that human activity is causing to our climate and the consequences and threats of those changes to biodiversity, food security, supply chains, infrastructure, and entire cultures not to mention the odd UNESCO world heritage site. The Thames 2100 plan is what is known as an adaptive pathway that accepts the changes that are happening and seeks to adapt to them through a robust risk management strategy. For countries like, say Barbados, there is not much opportunity for adaptation. You can't build a tidal barrier around a Caribbean island and you can't really adapt to hurricanes whose magnitudes are increasing due to climate change.

The seas have always held their risks, as that magnificent painting of Paul, shipwrecked on Malta reminds us, but those risks have never before in human history been systemic. Paul relied on prayer, trusted in God, and God brought him ashore safely. Should our response as Christians to the climate crisis we face be prayer? Should we trust in God to bring us safely through the storms of change and simply continue to live as we do? All will be well, says Julian of Norwich. Let's not get all teenage existential angst about this. Well, just in

case you are tempted to relax and trust that the insurance industry has got this one covered, a report by Aviva, the largest general insurance company in the world, notes that If we do not bend the curve of emissions and global temperature trajectories, and close the gaps to get as close to 1.5°C as possible, the physical impacts of warming in excess of 2°C will threaten the lives and livelihoods of billions of people, nature, global security and the stability (possibly the existence) of the financial system. Insurance industry is not known for hyperbole.

We know that insurers and reinsurers are already raising premiums in the face of dramatic rises in loss events, and in some cases are not from offering cover “at any price”. We also know that in a world without insurance to manage risk and offset losses, the rest of finance as we know it would become unworkable.

I suspect that in the face of what the insurance industry calls ‘acts of God’, prayer is not enough.

Perhaps now we are ready to hear afresh God’s word through the scriptures today. They are... cracking readings. God’s call to Abram – the founding story of the Abrahamic faiths. Paul’s letter to the Romans where he reads Abram’s response as faith in response to God’s gift of a promise that Abram will be blessed in land and ancestry. Then John’s Gospel, and Jesus’ revelation to Nicodemus, that the God’s promise, the promise of the kingdom, is not physical, not of the flesh, not the blessing of a land and literal descendants, but spiritual. It can only be seen through by being born of the spirit.

The blessing that God gives us through Jesus Christ is a fulfilment of the promise made to Abram. Paul’s point is that it is open to all of us through faith, just the same as it was for Abram, and it is the promise of a kingdom in which God’s love reigns and we are reconciled with one another and with God. It is the promise of peace, a peace that we can share in here on earth in and through our relationships with one another and a harmonious or sustainable relationship with the world in which we live. It is the promise of a peace that we are drawn into for all eternity in and through our relationship to God through our faith in Jesus Christ.

Now the thing to remember is that this is a promise. It is not realised. We must believe that God’s gift is real, that what Jesus reveals is possible can, in fact, be made possible. And here is where we come back to prayer. Prayer, in my view, is about shaping our intention to action. It is not about trusting that God will

do it for us. That is an abnegation of responsibility, and through gift of the Spirit, God has given us responsibility to act in his name and to realise the promise of the kingdom, to refashion the world in the image of God, to instantiate God's love and peace in so far as possible within our own relationships to others and the world at large.

So, we need to pray, for sure. Because we are nowhere near that. We are all flawed, fallible, hard-hearted humans who hold grudges and seek status and wealth to elevate ourselves above others, we have fragile egos and insecurities that inhibit our forgiveness of others and generosity towards them. We have all sorts of biases and filters that reflect our image of ourselves back to us and being Christian, really being faithful to the vision of God's love in the world, that is hard work, and even when we try it, it makes us vulnerable, and we hate being vulnerable. Or maybe I am just speaking for myself.

So, we need to pray, we need to shape our intentions to action, because the world is not how it should be, and there are really big problems that need all of us to contribute to solving them, especially those of us who live in the wealthy global north. Pray that the financial world will start to reprice assets to account for climate risks and reallocate capital to those who need it and are most vulnerable. Then, open your portfolio and check your pension fund and see whether you are invested in fossil fuels or arms companies – and every tracker fund is. Then pray some more and ask yourself whether you expect God to solve the problem or whether you want to be part of the solution. Now, I get it, these things are complicated, and we are all compromised to varying degrees. Myself, very much included. There is no purity and no perfection to be attained – there is only a question of what trajectory do you want to be on, and how fast are you able to move and grow? I don't know what is right or possible for you and my own aspirations will always exceed my capacity.

But as Christians we believe that Jesus Christ has revealed that through forgiveness we can be reconciled with one another, and that love, harmony, and peace, is what we are created for and called into. We forget this all the time and it is easy to feel judged, but remember, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.