

Chapel of St Peter and St Paul, ORNC
5.00pm Choral Evensong
Fourth Sunday of Easter [21 April 2024]
Readings: Acts 4, v 5-12; John 10, v 11-18

Last Sunday Bishop Michael Doe preached an excellent sermon in which he explored some of the historical and theological background to the current crisis unfolding in the Holy Land. And among the various points he made, the bishop reminded us of the role that scripture has played in justifying, perhaps even encouraging, bigotry and violence among those claiming to follow the one true God. For those of us who are western Christians, it's impossible to approach the conflict in Israel and Palestine without recognising our own long history of antisemitism, culminating in the genocide of six million Jews over the course of the Second World War. But neither can we, as Bishop Michael pointed out, ignore the ways that we in the West have often facilitated a situation in which Palestinians – Christian and Muslim alike – have suffered and continue to suffer in unspeakable ways. Given all this history, then, how should we as Christians today conceive of our own role and identity in relation to those scriptures that have inspired so much bitterness and division? And specifically in light of this evening's readings, how are to reconcile the central claim of Christ as the way to salvation with an understandable urge not just to tolerate but indeed to honour those who do not share in this belief?

The temptation among some Christians, of course, has been to downplay or even to ignore those parts of the New Testament that are uncomfortably exclusive in their claims. Given the Church's long track record of chauvinism and persecution, surely it's better to emphasise those aspects of the Gospel that are less contentious? Yet as our passage from the Book of Acts makes clear, belief in Christ as the one true way to God cannot simply be detached and quietly discarded. When Peter is called upon by the religious authorities to explain just how he has healed the crippled man, he is unequivocal in his conclusion. He has done this, he says, in the name of Jesus Christ, 'and there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved' (4.12). Given that he is making his witness

in the Temple itself and in the presence of the Jewish elite, there really is no way around it: Peter and the other followers of Christ are asserting a whole new way of understanding God's will, one that simply cannot be reconciled with the existing structures. Some kind of confrontation, then, between the status quo and this new spiritual movement would seem to be inevitable.

If we turn to our reading in the Gospel of John, we once again encounter the same kind of language and attitude that might well make a religious pluralist feel uneasy. Perhaps not so at first, as Jesus characterises himself as the good shepherd, determined to protect those already in his flock. But then also comes his assertion that 'I have other sheep, that are not of this fold; I must bring them also, and they will heed my voice. So there shall be one flock, one shepherd' (10.16). Although elsewhere he has been clear about his primary concern with his fellow Jews, here Jesus anticipates a universal salvation, one by which there shall be, as he puts it, 'one flock, one shepherd'. Yet this in itself is not an alien concept in the Jewish tradition. In the prophet Isaiah, for example, we repeatedly hear of God's determination to send a messiah who will reconcile all the nations of the earth (eg. 11.10, 60.1). What does seem to be different here, and this is essential to any exclusive claims we wish to make about Christ, is that such exclusiveness is always intimately bound up in suffering and sacrifice. There is no power, there is no prestige, there is no privilege, tied up in claiming Jesus as the one way to God the Father. Rather, there is only the promise that the one who is ready to lay his life for the sheep – whoever they may be and wherever they may come from – will one day be enabled to take it up again (v.17).

So where does this leave us as Christians now, burdened as we may be with the sins of our history, yet certain that we must never disown the universal claims of the Gospel? To begin with, we should remember that in speaking forcefully of Christ's primacy, the scriptures were being recorded when the Church was weak and persecuted, and its claims were being made by those suffering on the margins. For these Christians, the reality of the Cross was ever-present. Yet since then, whenever the Church has sought to impose its claims by force, it has done so in the absence of the Cross. Indeed, it has sought to impose something other than true Christianity.

Because, of course, true Christian faith does not impose, it does not coerce, it does not compete. Rather, it makes its assertions about the nature of God in the awareness that the One who made such promises did so not by taking life, but by giving it. So, when we witness against the violence and bigotry of others, we can only do so in a spirit of repentance and in light of this self-giving. When we assert that Jesus Christ is the true way to God, again, we do so in a spirit of repentance and in light of this self-giving. But we also do so knowing that the Cross is not the end of the Christian story, that if our claims about Christ are rooted in his suffering, they are also made glorious through his rising again. In this season of Easter, then, we make our great claims about Christ in true humility, but also, and always, we make them with joy.