

Easter 6 2008

Genesis 8 v20 – 9 v17 p10, Acts 17 vv 22-31 p1113, 1 Peter 3 vv 13-22 p1219, John 14 vv 15-21 p1082

Things swiftly got too hot for Paul and his companions in Thessalonica. So they moved on to Berea and conducted a successful mission there. But the opposition from Thessalonica followed them and stirred up more trouble in Berea. So they put Paul on a ship for Athens, where he would wait for his friends, Silas and Timothy, to catch up with him.

Athens was a very famous city. Though long past its original glory, it was still the home of schools of philosophers and great architectural treasures. It was full of shrines to the gods of the pagan religions. Many people would have been awed to visit Athens. So Paul did some sightseeing and he was horrified to see that the Athenians were entirely given over to idolatry. They worshipped images of gold and silver and the things that human beings had made. Instead of worshipping the God Who made them; they worshipped the things that they themselves had made. Paul's response was to tell them about the living God. The Athenian worship of things was misguided. The true God was unknown to them, but He ought not to have been unknown to them. God made everything. So everything that exists bears witness to the glory of the one, true God. If those clever Athenian philosophers had thought about it, such a God does not need human beings to build Him temples to live in or to offer Him sacrifices. On the contrary, it is in Him that we live and move and have our being. We are dependent on Him, not He on us. If you think about it, you can work it out for yourself. God is and He is infinitely greater than we are. God forgives ignorance, but He also calls upon us to repent, because all human beings will be judged on the criterion of Jesus. God has demonstrated this by raising Jesus from the dead. Paul starts with what they know – or, at least, what they ought to know. Then he goes on to what God has revealed. He gives them the opportunity to put their faith in Jesus, to know God and, through knowing God, to receive eternal life. As it happens, some mock, some want to hear more and a few (including Dionysius – or Denis - and Damaris) believe.

Last Wednesday was St George's Day and I was invited to the Patronal Festival Service at St George's Church, Gravesend. It seemed a bit far to cycle. So I went on the train. When I got off at Gravesend Station, I was surprised by the crowds of young people thronging the streets. Some people were still on their way home from work. Some were shopping. Some were on their way to various places of entertainment. Some were just hanging.

The service was very nice – beautifully presented with some good hymns. We heard an excellent sermon on bearing witness to Christ through self sacrificial love. The Deputy Mayor of Gravesend attended and read a lesson. In our prayers, we remembered the needs of the borough and the nation, as well as those of the Church. So it was an excellent occasion on a civic as well as an ecclesiastical level.

I guess that about fifty of us attended – mostly my age and older. So what about all those young people on the streets? Where were they? Why weren't they in their town's parish church, celebrating their town's Patronal Festival? There was an advertisement outside a card shop exhorting us to celebrate St George's Day properly, but I think they meant by

buying greetings cards, rather than by going to Church to worship the God whose martyr George is.

Do we feel Paul's passion? Does it give us pain that the crowds in Gravesend are as indifferent to God and as ignorant as the Athenians were 2,000 years ago? Does it pain us that so many people in Cuxton and Halling apparently neither know nor care about God and Jesus? Would we stick our necks out, like Paul, and tell them the hard truths they need to know?

It's easy to condemn, but I don't think condemnation is generally fair. Jesus describes the crowds of C1 Palestine as being like sheep without a shepherd. People know that they need something, but they do not know what they need to know.

And we are His witnesses, or at least we ought to be. The Church does seem to have a very low profile in modern Britain. While I was standing on Strood Station waiting for my connection, a young man came up to me and asked me who I was. When I told him, he said that you have to be careful. Most people you see dressed as priests are conmen! People don't come across the Church much in their daily lives. There are far fewer clergy than there used to be. I must admit that those of us who are left have made ourselves less conspicuous in that we tend not to wear clerical collars when we are not on official duties any more. There is also the fact that many clergy, like most people, go everywhere by car. So you don't meet them on the street, the bus or the train. But the Church is not only the clergy. There are far more lay people than clergy – as there always have been. What sort of witnesses are lay people, ordinary Church members, for Christ in the wider world? One member of the congregation on Wednesday said to me that she was disappointed that there was not more support for the St George's service from the regular Sunday congregation. Wouldn't it have been wonderful if those young people on the streets of Gravesend had seen crowds thronging to the parish Church? They might have wondered why. They might even have asked some of those people thronging to church what was the reason for the hope that is in them. As it was, if they had stuck their heads around the door, they would have seen a lot of empty seats and might well have concluded that what was going on there was not very important, significant or interesting. The deputy Mayor was there because he clearly thought that there ought to be a link between the Church and the civic life of the borough. But might he have wondered whether other people, even Church people, thought that link was important if they could not even be bothered to attend in decent numbers?

Attending Church is by no means the only way we bear witness to Christ in the world. The world is full of signs of His glory, including Noah's rainbow. It is, however, in the fellowship of the Church that we receive the promised Holy Spirit, Who gives us life in such abundance that we cannot help but share it with those who are dead in the ignorance of unbelief. The way to fill our churches is not to condemn those who stay away because they do not know any better. The way to fill our churches is for us to keep so close to Christ that we share His love for all people, whatever the circumstances of their lives, and manifest that love in action in everything we do in our every day lives.