

Trinity 5 2016 – Whither the United Kingdom?

I Kings 19 vv 15-21 p361, Psalm 16, Galatians 5 vv 1-25 p1171, Luke 9 vv 51-62 p1040

The result of the European referendum was announced on 24th June, the Birthday of St John the Baptist. Some of you will be pleased with the result, some sorry. Either way, as a country, we have taken a momentous step. We and all the nations of Europe now have to think very seriously about our future relationships and our leaders and theirs need our prayers in the enormous responsibilities they now face. In many ways, this whole debate has been a question of identity. How do we see ourselves? What kind of a people are we? What sort of a nation do we aspire to be? Are we English, British, European or simply human? Actually, there is no reason of course why you can't be all four, but different people will find it more natural to think of themselves as first and foremost a member of the human race or as an Englishman or woman or as a citizen of the United Kingdom or as part of the European cultural family. At a gut level, I believe that much of the referendum debate is about whether or not we identify with Europe. I have my own opinion on that. Other Christian people may hold a different opinion. Many may still be unsure.

As Christians, however, much more significantly and certainly than any secular categorisations of nationality or ethnicity, we belong to *a great multitude, which no man could number, of all nations, and kindreds, and people and tongues* - the Church of God. Christian is our essential identity – not primarily English or British or European – though we may be all of those - above all Christian. Definitely human (Christians are human!), but with a special calling to be the light of the world and the salt of the earth. As Christians, the people of God, the Body of Christ, it is our commission to complete the work which God gave to Jesus to do because He so loved the world. Christians are called out of the world into the Church in order to serve the world by proclaiming the Good News of the Kingdom of God.

So, whatever our future relationship with the European Union, whether or not we think of Britain as a European country, as Christians what we really most desire is that ours should be a Christian country. The commission God gave St John the Baptist was to proclaim the Kingdom of God. *Repent ye for the Kingdom of heaven is at hand.* John came to prepare the way for Jesus. The archangel Gabriel revealed to Zacharias, father of the as yet unborn John, *And many of the children of Israel shall he turn to the Lord their God. And he shall go before him in the spirit and power of Elias, to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children, and the disobedient, to the wisdom of the just; to make ready a people prepared for the Lord.* John's job was to make Israel ready to receive the Lord. What might be our vocation to make England ready to receive Jesus, to become part of the Kingdom of God?

On the Third Sunday in Advent, we pray, *O LORD Jesu Christ, who at thy first coming didst send thy messenger to prepare thy way before thee; Grant that the ministers and stewards of thy mysteries may likewise so prepare and make ready thy way, by turning the hearts of the disobedient to the wisdom of the just, that at thy second coming to judge the world we may be found an acceptable people in thy sight, who livest and reignest with the Father and the Holy Spirit, ever one God, world without end. Amen.* That's a fine prayer, but it's not comprehensive enough. You could read *the ministers and stewards of thy mysteries* as referring only to the clergy, but God's work is a task for all Christians. Every single one of us who calls on the Name of the Lord is a minister and steward of the mysteries of God. We

are what we are by the grace of God and that grace is given to us to share with other people as we all do the work of God in the world. You could also read *that at thy second coming to judge the world we may be found an acceptable people in thy sight*, in such a way as to limit the *we* who pray to be found acceptable as just us here in this church, or just us Christians. Well, we certainly do need to pray for God's grace to be found acceptable in His sight, but I am sure that this prayer extends out into the world. It includes those who do not yet know Jesus, that they too might come to know Him and thereby become an acceptable people in His sight. In a prayer book composed for an established Church such as ours, I am sure that prayer is meant to include the whole nation, not just those of us who *profess and call themselves Christians*. And it wouldn't be a Christian prayer if it were restricted just to England and did not encompass all the nations of the earth because Jesus commissioned His Church to teach all nations and baptise them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost.

But, how can we do what John did? On Friday we prayed, *Almighty God, by whose providence thy servant John Baptist was wonderfully born, and sent to prepare the way of thy Son our Saviour, by preaching of repentance: Make us so to follow his doctrine and holy life, that we may truly repent according to his preaching; and after his example constantly speak the truth, boldly rebuke vice, and patiently suffer for the truth's sake; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.* John began his ministry by preaching repentance. There is a lot for our nation to repent of. There are the sins of individuals and our collective sins. We neglect God. As a nation, we neglect God. I sometimes meditate on the Ten Commandments. I shan't go through them now, but, if you try it, especially if you meditate on the Ten Commandments in the light of what Jesus says and of what St Paul says in the New Testament, it is obvious that England falls very far short of the requirements of the Kingdom of God. When the prophet Daniel was praying for the restoration of his own nation Israel, he prayed, *To the Lord our God belong mercies and forgivenesses, though we have rebelled against him; neither have we obeyed the voice of the Lord our God, to walk in his laws which he set before us.* He proclaimed that his was a sinful nation and he confessed the sins of his nation to God, trusting in God's promises to forgive and to restore. That sentence from Daniel is included in the penitential materiel of the prayer books of our established Church.

So we should be preaching repentance to England, pointing out what is sinful in our national and individual lives, and confessing our nation's sins to God, trusting in His promise for forgiveness and restoration. We won't be popular. John wasn't universally popular. King Herod imprisoned him and, at the behest of his wife and step-daughter, had him beheaded in the prison. We would, however, *after his example constantly speak the truth, boldly rebuke vice, and patiently suffer for the truth's sake* as we pray for grace to do. Being a Christian is about witnessing Christ to the world and it is costly to do so.

Noble as martyrdom would be, however, we would be jumping the gun. Before the bit about following John's example and boldly rebuking vice, the prayer asks, *Make us so to follow his doctrine and holy life, that we may truly repent according to his preaching.* Before we could tell the world to repent of its sins, before we could start criticising other people, we should have to repent of our own sins. *How wilt thou say to thy brother, Let me pull out the mote out*

of thine eye; and behold a beam is in thine own eye? What are our own sins as individuals, as the Church in Cuxton and Halling, as the Church in England? Again, we could meditate on those Ten Commandments. We could consider how they are summarised in the twin commandments to love God with all our heart, soul, mind and strength, and to love our neighbours as ourselves. Does God really come first in our lives? Does He come first in our allocation of our time? Does He have the first call on our money? Are our talents and our opportunities at His disposal? Or do we expect God to make do with what is left over when we've looked after ourselves and our families? By the way, I mentioned the allocation of time first because I myself have a particular difficulty in being unselfish in the allocation of my time, or rather of the time which God gives me. For the Church to be really effective in this village and in this country, we should have to repent of everything which holds us back from wholeheartedly serving God.

That might mean finding the courage to tell people about Jesus and why we believe in Him. It might mean being much more generous with our time and money in doing God's work and supporting other people in their Christian activities. It might mean a much greater involvement with the community as yet outside the Church. It might mean spending ourselves in prayer. It might mean supporting missions and charities, not so much to do God's work on our behalf, but as part of the way in which we share in the task of proclaiming the Kingdom of God. It would mean that we *after John's example constantly speak the truth, boldly rebuke vice, and patiently suffer for the truth's sake.*

So, important as is our nation's relationship with Europe, infinitely more valuable is our nation's relationship with God. Where do we stand, not only with reference to Europe, but where do we stand in relationship with the whole world? Are we the light of the world and the salt of the earth? We can only be those things if we are right with God. We've all had a small part in determining our relationship with Europe, in voting in this referendum. What about the part we all have in determining our nation's relationship with God? That's the one that really in the end matters.