

Gunpowder Plot Evensong
5th November 2024
The Revd Fergus Butler-Gallie

I shall take as my text this evening, the third verse of the twenty third chapter of the Book of Acts.

‘Then said Paul unto him, God shall smite thee, thou whited wall’

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen

There is nothing I like more than being invited to a counter cultural event. We gather to give thanks for the foiling of a terrorist plot some years ago. Once, this service was ubiquitous in English religion. Now, a quirk. Yet even when it was more widespread, it attracted counter cultural. There are probably, as we have heard, few people more properly embody swimming against the tide than Dr Sacheverell. Stubborn, irritable, vain, a clay jar if ever there was one. He was the definition of counter cultural. He was also, in his diagnosis of the church and state of his time, right. The irony is, of course, that Sacheverell sought to call out a prevailing culture precisely because he sought to save the Church he loved. On this day when we celebrate the fact that the pillars of church and state in this country escaped violent destruction, it is obvious that we might think at how they are threatened now. Of course, as Sacheverell knew, the threat of external violence is nothing compared to the threat of invidious cultural change.

What are the great cultural movements of our age of our age? Or put another way- what has replaced barrels of gunpowder underneath our cherished institutions?

Despair, consumerism, a lack of passion for that which is beautiful and true and a seemingly unquenchable passion for that which is wicked and stupid and wrong. The suffocating influence of management over action. Most worrying of all, a lack of faith, hope and love.

Nowhere is this more obvious than in the Church. In the lesson from the book of Acts, Paul faces the Sanhedrin, who order him struck for his attempts to speak of the living God. In an interesting parallel- it is a living faith which speaks and shows up their internal hypocrisies that is to them a threat more dangerous than the external physical violence posed by the empire of Rome.

In some ways, Paul’s experience is a reassuring one. The faith has never been popular, least of all among its managing caste. Yet his choice of insult for the chief priest is particularly apposite.

There is nothing more oppressive than a whited wall.

Why? Well because a whited wall is ostensibly inoffensive. It gives the impression of a neutrality and a fairness, of being something onto which anyone might project anything they wish. Yet, to be surrounded by whited walls is a very different thing. They loom in, the sense of being confined predominates. The blankness and lack of inspiration or decoration or information upon them becomes more constraining than any text or picture could possibly be. Bleakness is oppressive in ways that even a liveliness with which we do not agree can never be.

We live in an age of whited walls. In both Church and state. What are we then to do? How are we to serve the living God?

Well, Holy Scripture provides us with examples and inspiration. We are not the first to live in an era of whited walls. To know what it is to Labour in a vineyard run by corrupted husband men. What do the people of God in old and new testaments do in such cases?

What of the prophets, the exiles? Did they give up? Did they simply say well being the remnant of Israel isn’t good enough for me- I want to balm for what I mistakenly believe is my conscience, and must therefore have unity with Babylon or Egypt or Samaria? They did not.

Did the Maccabees say ‘well some of these ideas must work’, Antiochus is merely spreading what Alexander did and that was successful was it not? They did not.

Did the beloved disciple and our Lord’s blessed mother say, at the foot of the cross, well that’s that then? They did not: and their faith was such that there would have been no rejoicing as great as theirs, when he burst forth from the whited walls of the tomb.

Yet it is not just in Holy Scripture that these examples fall to us. In our own land and in her Church too there have been lives that have dared to speak and live against the whited wall.

Did Dr Cranmer say, well, Christian truth is a price worth paying to appease those currently in power? He did not, and he plunged first into the flames the hand which was tempted so to do.

Did Sacheverell say, ah but from a bishopric I might be able to have more power over things from within, why not keep a low profile and hope for a pat on the head? He did not, and he granted the church a brief reprieve from the corrupt and oligarchs class that threatened her and for it he was acclaimed across the nation by the ordinary people of God.

Did Keble say, ah but the Church must change, and her old settlement and old ways must be made new and ‘fit for purpose’. He did not, and instead he made a solemn vow that ‘should the Church of England fail, it will still be found in my parish’.

Scripture and history have their examples but what of our generation? What can we do? Well do as Paul did. He looked for Christ Jesus and, as Acts tells us ‘the Lord stood by him, and said, Be of good cheer, Paul: for as thou hast testified of me in Jerusalem, so must thou bear witness also at Rome.’ In the midst of his despair, Paul clung to Christ. And having clung to Christ he found the strength to bear witness. We must do the same.

Cling utterly to Christ, cling wholly to Christ, cling only to Christ. For what will save the Church is not management structure, it is not jargon, is not a pale imitation of worldly ways. What will save the Church, what has already saved the Church and what continues to save the Church each and every day that we partake of its sweetness, is the precious blood of Christ.

The victory then, in terms of the metaphysical, the cosmic, the ultimate triumph over the world and its ways has already been won by none other than the body and blood of Christ Jesus. Third we assent to, this we believe. Let it be something we live. Let this great faith of ours not be a lukewarm faith- having been saved by Christ let us seek to imitate him. Go and serve. Go to the Galilees and the Nazareths. go to the Bethsaidas and the Bethanys. Go to the Jerusalems and the Romes. For they are here in this land, masquerading under the names of the English towns and countryside. They lie there let down by a Church which has too long seemed to them a whited wall, for too long has been run by whited walls. Go to them, serve them as priests and as lay people.

Go, visit the sick, bury the dead, celebrate the sacraments, baptise the faithful, teach the fallen, comfort the afflicted, go and love the people of God with your whole heart. For that will be the most radical, the most Christ like act of defiance you can make against these whited walls which now hem in our Church. That is how you will eventually break them down. By doing what they will not do, what they cannot do. By showing the people of England the abiding love of God.

And in that vein let us finish where we began- by giving thanks- for what Dr Pusey called, in relation to this day, ‘God’s undeserved mercies’. Grace is such that we cannot ever become worthy of it. Yet, what we might do is to speak so powerfully of it, to live so obviously in light of it that we paint some colour even onto the crumbling, whited walls. Go, do so, and give thanks to God.

In the name of the father and of the son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.