

Pilgrimage to Rome

Sundays in Lent I've been talking about Pilgrimage. Four weeks ago we thought about the people of Israel as pilgrims to the Promised Land, three weeks ago we made a trip to Agen, the place of St Faith's martyrdom and two weeks ago we legged it to Canterbury. Last week, we took a Refreshment Sunday break on Mothering Sunday but today we're back on the trail - this week to Rome.

The year 1054 marks a significant date in Church history. The Church in the East and the Church in the West decided they had to go separate ways. Almost a thousand years ago Christianity formally separated, some would say divorced, to create the Eastern Orthodox Church (in the East) and the Roman Catholic Church (in the West). The Church split in two for many reasons: doctrinal, theological, linguistic, political and geographical. Previously, the eastern and western churches had argued over everything from small phrases in the creeds, the appointments of senior leaders, the crusades, the ownership of property and, probably, over who made the coffee and who chose the hymns – and so by the year 1054, 'the church' became two.

Two weeks ago we thought about how Canterbury, as the seat of our Archbishop, is the spiritual centre of the Anglican Church. Rome of course is the spiritual centre of the Roman Catholic Church. And whereas we have the Archbishop of Canterbury who has to try and speak on behalf of all Anglicans, Roman Catholics have the Pope – who is trying to do just that this weekend – trying to make some kind of sense of how dreadfully the church has failed to deal with priests who have abused children.

So why should we worry about Rome? Surely, it's their centre not ours.

Well the reason is because it is part of our Christian story. It has been part of our historic pilgrimage. In the same way that the Old Testament feels remote and distant, it still remains an important part of our journey – and we shouldn't forget it's place in that story.

In the same way that Jesus didn't ever go to Agen or to Canterbury, he never went to Rome either – but Peter his closest disciple certainly did, and so did the apostle Paul. From the earliest days the Church had to live with Rome in one way or another. As the political and administrative centre of a huge empire, it was the engine room that made the persecution of Christians the norm across Europe until the Roman Empire adopted Christianity – and then it changed.

From being the centre of persecution it became the corporate HQ and you can see that even if you go there today. The ruins of the Coliseum where Christians were once used for sport and St Peter's Basilica and the Vatican where from where the Church exercise its authority. But whilst Jesus was very familiar with Roman culture, by virtue of the fact that he lived in an occupied country, he didn't seem to express much by the way of ill will towards it. Even though the system of Roman law failed him and allowed him to be crucified. Before that he had spoken warmly of the faith of the Roman Centurion and he had argued for paying taxes to Caesar - but he'd have had no idea that within 400 years Rome would be the western centre of the Christian faith that had begun with him. He'd have had no idea that his simple community of faithful disciples, faithful pilgrims, would become such a hierarchical and massively wealthy force for good and sometimes for bad, or that his teaching of love and neighbourliness would result with a church that in 1054 would split the world down the centre to create churches in the east and the west. I think Jesus would have been horrified to think of how divisive his message would become.

This week, the College of Canons met to elect our new bishop. All of the ordained and lay canons met, in our robes (which have Roman origin) in the Chapel of St Thomas to do as we were summoned, which was 'to vote for Her Majesty's nominated candidate for the post of Bishop of Portsmouth'. And to my surprise, we had to vote in Latin – the language of Rome. Before the ceremony we were duly told that when our name was called, we each had to stand and say 'placet' to indicate that we were for the nomination or 'non placet' if we were against. It was added that whilst we could know the words for voting no, we were actually only permitted to vote 'yes'. Otherwise we would be pronounced 'contumacious'!

As it happened we were all happy to vote 'in favour', Bishop Christopher seems like a good choice, but this rather archaic ceremony (which also included a few words in French) points to something which niggles within me about the nature of the Church. Latin is the historic language of Rome, it is the language of a very hierarchical church, a church which governs from top down. And just as that defines the Church of Roman, it also defines to some extent the Church of England – the Church decides and we for the most part accept what it says. You have a Vicar – someone who acts vicariously on your behalf and so I'm left to make all sorts of decisions about the nature of church on your behalf at the local level. It's the way the church has become. You can vote which ever way you like, so long as you vote the way we tell you!

The Psalm for this week includes this verse:

Have mercy on me, O God, for they trample over me;
All day long they assault and oppress me.

'Trample over' ... is all too often is what 'the church' has done. It has at times trampled on the lives of abused children, it has trampled on the role and ministry of women, it has trampled sometimes on minority groups, on freedom of belief and sometimes it has trampled on justice and democracy. There have of course been times, many more times perhaps when it has got things right – but a hierarchical organisation always runs the risk of getting carried away with too much power.

A pilgrimage to Rome in my mind is a pilgrimage to confront the problem of power. Power in the world, power in the church and power in the individual. The questions to ask are these: What would Jesus make of what his Church has become? And, what does the church need to do to be to be the church of Christ?

So its good to go to Rome. Earlier this year the pope made an offer to frustrated Anglicans making that exact journey – but that I think is a step backwards, not a step forwards. A pilgrimage to Rome means looking at our church, nationally and locally, and at what God calls it to be.

Children yesterday made this cross which I hope you'll agree is a bit more colourful than crosses in Lent normally are. I used my power and got them to make it in Mosaic because that was a Roman art form. Rich Romans liked to walk on fabulous mosaics. Their mosaics were full of colour and often told a story. A pilgrimage to Rome wouldn't be complete without a Mosaic and this one comes as a reminder of what God did, and of what God does. I feel rather uncomfortable here because I've got the cross behind me – it feels like its weighing down on me and its certainly big enough to crush me. But you've got the cross where it should be, in front of you – not pushing you from behind but rather pulling you towards the future.

Next Saturday the Renaissance choir come to sing a concert entitled Pilgrimage to Rome – it's a concert which features music by composers who were drawn there to work and who when they arrived were inspired to write beautiful music which proclaimed their love and praise of God. On the one hand that's about the past – but on the other, a pilgrimage to Rome is all about the present and the future. It is about a church which is willing to be confronted by the power it exercises, brave enough to be humbled, human enough to be vulnerable, creative enough to be colourful and natural enough to be beautiful.