

Sermon preached by the Very Revd. Michael Tavinor on Sunday 25 September being the 14th Sunday after Trinity.

Gospel reading: Matthew 21. 23-32

By co-incidence I was in North America on 9/11 in 2001 and then again exactly ten years later. In 2001 I was in San Francisco on holiday – of course, as far away from New York as you were in the UK. But it felt nearer and when it was announced that day that other big America cities were being put on alert, it felt very worrying indeed. But on the Sunday after 9/11, I experienced something very heartening – attending the Eucharist at Grace Cathedral in San Francisco, I heard a wonderful sermon from the dean and a short but moving ceremony of unity as the local imam greeted the dean and both expressed their solidarity in working for peace. That image has always remained with me as a symbol that reconciliation between those who hold different views can be achieved and that we should never, ever give up trying. Ten years later, I was in North America again, though this time in Canada, and on 9/11 happened to be in a conversation with friends. One said ‘Well, how long will it be before Islam takes over the world?’ Good question, perhaps, but knowing the stable from which the speaker came, I thought (though didn’t say) – ‘well that’s the angle from which many Christians have come and still come today’ – think Crusades – think the 1910 World Conference on Evangelism in Edinburgh, when it was confidently predicted by the delegates that within 10 years there would be universal evangelism and Christianity would triumph. Within 4 years came the First World War, and a spectacular unravelling of such confidence. But there is certainly something in the big religions which has always needed to dominate, to be right, to be top dog, to be in a position of power.

This was brought home to me, tragically, in visiting the Martyrs’ Shrine, on the shores of Lake Huron in Canada. The shrine is to several 17th century Jesuits who were cruelly butchered by the Iroquois. Tragic, of course. But also tragic was the fact that what seems to have incensed the Iroquois was their being forcibly baptised by the Jesuits. The rightness of Christianity coming face to face with an altogether different way of looking at religion. For the native American way was/is not one of owning or possessing the world or other people by dominating but by working with nature and sharing it.

This morning’s gospel reminds us that it’s alright not to know – it’s alright not to be right. Faced with the subtlety of Jesus’ goodness and teaching, the elders, usually so sure of themselves are forced to say ‘We do not know.’ And that would have been both uncomfortable and salutary for them.

It’s uncomfortable for us to say – ‘we do not know’ – about matters of faith – but the truth is - we don’t. What happens to us after death – deep mysteries of life and of the universe. So much we don’t know – and I think we shouldn’t be ashamed of saying so and shouldn’t try to bluff our way out of saying so. It’s not a betrayal of our Christian faith.

Indeed, Jesus goes further, in saying that the people who *know* – the religious people – the Pharisees and elders – will be held back and those who, presumably *don't* know – tax collectors and harlots – will go ahead of them.

But note this - Jesus is not saying that those presently in the know won't get to their destination - he's saying that we'll all be there together – but perhaps in a different order than our over - ordered minds might imagine. He's holding out to us a vision of inclusion – where those who think they know and those are assumed *not* to know are together – sharing their insights and coming to a common mind. That's surely the mark of a mature Christian community – not that we all hold the same views – not that we all tow the party line – but that we are able to believe in what really matters - at different levels and stages. You'll see on the pewsheet that we call ourselves 'An Inclusive Church' and we hope this will give the message that we really want to drive home – that all are welcome here. Cathedrals *have* to be like this – we *have* to encompass a 'family hold back' attitude – we *have* to give honour to those on the margins – who come in just to light a candle – who are here fleetingly. Cathedrals, indeed all Christian communities should be inclusive, welcoming rich, poor, gay, straight, black, white, those who are mature in their faith – those who are really rather shaky.

And Christian doctrine isn't, I think, about keeping us 'up to the mark' – it's not about 'right and wrong' – 'knowing and not knowing', although it's tempting to think it is. Our creeds are not there to admonish us – doctrines are not photographs of reality – they are the attempted descriptions of heavenly things by means of the hints and guesses which earthly things provide. And if we find some of it difficult, that's alright. For in the realm of knowledge, as everywhere else, to be invulnerable is not to be immortal - it is only to be dead.

I've said it before and I'll say it again – and I really ought to do something about it – and that is, to write a version of the Nicene Creed which we *sing* rather than *say*, because I honestly believe that when we sing something, we transform the black and white of words into something far more subtle and capable of greater inclusion. Back to the native races. Bruce Chatwin, in his book *Songlines*, speaks thus, not of the Iroquois, but of a similar aboriginal people, this time in Australia:

The ancients sang their way all over the world. They sang the rivers and ranges, salt-pans and sand dunes. They hunted, ate, made love, danced, killed. Wherever their tracks led, they left a trail of music.

Similarly, C S Lewis in his book *The Weight of Glory* has these challenging words, reminding us that knowing and certainty are not always the mark of the mature Christian – but that, wonderfully, faith in Jesus can turn everything we know upside down. When we hold on too tightly to things we know, they can elude us:

C S Lewis says:

The books or the music in which we thought the beauty was located will betray us if we trust to them; it was not in them, it only came through them, and what came through them was longing...They are not the thing itself; they are only the scent of a flower we have not found, the echo of a tune we have not heard, news from a country we have never yet visited.