

Sermon for evensong, 15.11.15

This sermon was pretty well drafted about a week ago, and it started with a joke. After Paris (which I only heard about late yesterday afternoon) that didn't seem like a good idea any more. But when I thought about re-writing it, it seemed that actually it was still what I wanted to say. The parallel isn't exact – one of the most terrifying things about DAESH, or IS, or ISIS, or ISIL, or whatever you want to call them, is precisely that they don't actually care who they kill, anyone will do (and as many commentators have noted, they have far more Muslim victims than Christians to date). It's the killing that is important. So it's not as if we have a choice to make, where denying Jesus would save us: but it still raises the question of how we react in the face of those who represent everything we are against. There is a new and terrible "fiery furnace" into which it feels we may be thrust at any time. What are we to do? And are we strong enough?

In the famous Parable of the Sower that we heard again this evening, Jesus (unusually) actually explains the story to his disciples: the weeds are sinners who will be excluded from the Kingdom and thrown "into the fiery furnace" at the end of the age. This is hardly an ambiguous image, and it's one which fundamentalists of all sorts can happily adopt: on the basis that whoever ends up in the fiery furnace, it certainly won't be them. But I want to think about the fiery furnace in three illustrations.

In our Old Testament reading from Daniel, we see that the fiery furnace doesn't always get the last word. Daniel's three friends, Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego (and aren't you glad that the author decided to name the book after Daniel?) are threatened with the fiery furnace if they don't bow down with everyone else and worship the golden image King Nebuchadnezzar has made. They seem remarkably sanguine about this; they say first, that their God can save them; but then that even if he doesn't, they're still not going to do it. And their faith is spectacularly rewarded. There's a wall-painting from the Roman catacombs showing the figures in their suitably Eastern costumes strolling about rather coolly in the midst of the flames, arms outstretched as they chat to each other. The air of relaxation is even more remarkable when you consider this is one of the earliest catacombs built (2nd-4th centuries) and that Christians were periodically still suffering from bouts of persecution: for them, this wasn't just a story set in the distant past with an example of triumphant faith. Many of those who saw this painting might have been able to give eyewitness accounts of occasions where their saviour God had conspicuously not turned up to do the saving. And yet they were still there.

Secondly, I don't know if you've been watching the BBC's "The Last Kingdom". This is a series set in the Dark Ages, with the pagan Viking Danes wiping the floor with the various Christian kingdoms of England and the young man who will go on to be Alfred the Great just starting his career. To be honest, I'm not sure I can go so far as to recommend it, but there was a very interesting scene a couple of weeks ago, which has a slightly more modern or sceptical view of believers under threat. King Edmund of East Anglia has decided to change his policy of helping the Vikings: we first see him hanging up in his own chapel where the Danes have left him overnight to think over whether he really wants to continue with this policy change. Unsurprisingly perhaps, he's decided to do a U-turn, but his price for playing ball is that the Danes accept baptism (there's some discussion over what actually happens: someone who has been baptised explains there's a lot of water and it's very cold). Unfortunately the Danes are sidetracked by a painting of St Sebastian, ask for the story, and the king explains how the saint was shot full of arrows but lived.....because God provided a miracle. They decide that a good way of finding out how powerful Edmund's God is (and so whether he's worth

following) would be to repeat the experiment..... The King suggests that perhaps they don't need to worry about baptism for now, but no, they're now very taken with the idea.

And this is where it gets interesting. Up to this point the King has behaved in quite a "modern" way; his bluff has been called and he's backtracking. But once he's been backed into a corner he actually sticks to his guns. The Danes ask him if he thinks he's going to live, and his utterly serious response is "if God wills". You will know how it turns out from the fact that the king has entered English history as "St Edmund, King and Martyr".

And thirdly, the very opposite of a fiery furnace. Shusaku Endo is a Japanese Catholic author. His short story, "The Final Martyrs" is set in 17th century Japan after the government has closed the country to foreigners and foreign influences. Christianity has been flourishing, but now there is a brutal crackdown and the Japanese church loses its western priests and is driven underground. The story's main character was brought up in a Christian village, but unlike the others, he has renounced the faith rather than face torture and execution. Some years later – after years of odd jobs, not really fitting in and still feeling shame – he falls in by chance with the survivors from his village as they are being moved from one prison to another.....He has no idea why, but he goes along with them, in the freezing snow (here the furnace is a good thing: they are promised warmth if they will deny their faith). His former friends all refuse to have anything to do with him, and he can hardly expect a message from the Christ he has abandoned. Above all, he was too afraid to endure all this before, so how can he know he'll do any better this time?

I suspect it's an unusual Christian who hasn't at least idly considered what their response might be, especially after watching the news. I particularly remember a Bishop who led a chapel retreat in my university days: many years before he'd been Bishop's chaplain in the Church of South India, driving him along a road through the mountains. This road was regularly patrolled by a local bandit, who robbed most people, but killed Christians. A dark crowd directly ahead in the distance turned out when they got close to be..... only a herd of goats. As they went on their way, the Bishop said, "So what did you decide?" and only then did he realise they had both been thinking about it but not wanting to scare each other. And his response was "I couldn't". And the Bishop said "me neither". They had both silently contemplated and accepted martyrdom.

Not many of us find ourselves in that position. And I wonder whether in reality life is usually a little more complicated than that, without a defining critical moment: at different times we may proclaim what we believe; at other times we may have to be backed into a corner and say it through gritted teeth; and at other times we know perfectly well that we don't live up to either what we expect of ourselves.....or more to the point, what we think God expects of us. But surely what we know of the God who made himself so vulnerable that he died for us is that he recognises human weakness and frailty. Maybe it's the road to heaven that's paved with good intentions, because God can use them in ways we can't begin to imagine.

So let's go back to where we left our Japanese ex-Christian. He is despairing and alone in spite of the overcrowded cell. And then one of his fellow-prisoners reaches out and touches him lightly on the arm. In a low voice, he says that it doesn't matter if tomorrow he can't do it, if he fails again. "For today, the Lord Jesus is pleased just because you came here. He is pleased".

The Lord we acknowledge is love, and justice, and peace. Not hatred or fear, or the knee-jerk reaction. And if we are at the end of our endurance, and our strength to acknowledge him is only for the moment, it is enough.

The Lord Jesus is pleased. He is pleased.

Amen