

Wheatley United Reformed Church  
Sunday 25 May 2014 (Easter 6 – Year A; Rogation Sunday)  
Psalm 66.8-20; Acts 17.22-31; I Peter 3.13-22; John 14.15-21

Like some of you, I guess, I was brought up in Sunday School on stirring tales of heroism on the mission field. We were taken to see *The Inn of the Sixth Happiness*, which starred Ingrid Bergman in the rather unlikely role of Gladys Aylward, who had succeeded against all the odds in becoming a missionary in China and who had led over a hundred orphans to safety across the mountains, despite being wounded, when the Japanese invaded in 1938. My father had served in Madagascar with the Congregationalist London Missionary Society until the fall of France in 1940, so there was no escape at home. But a hundred years earlier, in 1839 John Williams, serving with the same Society as a missionary to Tahiti, the Cook Islands and Samoa, ended up in the cooking-pot on an island where they had never heard of him. A similar fate befell the Scottish missionary James Chalmers on another South Sea island as late as 1901. We may have a somewhat jaundiced impression of such pioneers these days, wondering if it really was appropriate to impose Christianity dressed up in western cultural clothes on peoples with very different traditions, or to open them up to the benefits of civilization, which probably benefited western economies more than it did them; not to mention the introduction of diseases to which they had no immunity. In fact, the London Missionary Society, always known as the LMS and sometimes confused with a railway company of that name, was relatively enlightened in its insistence that local cultures had to be understood and respected, and did not expect the churches it founded to provide a mirror image of what went on inside Gothic piles in the wealthier suburbs of Victorian cities. My father used to tell us that when it came to the offertory, his Malagasy congregations, who had no money, would bring fruit and vegetables and live chickens.

Preaching the Gospel in the sense of going out into public spaces has never been easy, and most of us walk by those who set up their stalls in city centres, as sometimes in Cornmarket, in embarrassed silence, partly because street preachers have a theology rather different from our own. Add into the mix the fact that in modern Britain Christianity is largely pilloried by the chattering classes and ignored by nearly

everyone else, and the problems are compounded. Its beliefs are thought to be irrational and to conflict with a scientific understanding of the universe, while its churches have been discredited for their readiness to persecute and to kill in the name of religion, and, more recently, for their tolerance of corruption. Interestingly, this is not a new phenomenon. The German philosopher and theologian Friedrich Schleiermacher, who lived from 1768 to 1834, wrote a work addressed to what he called the ‘cultured despisers’ of religion, as he sought to reconcile Christianity with the rationalism of what we have come to know as the Enlightenment. Ever since that period in the later eighteenth century Christianity has been on the defensive, struggling to catch up with the modern world. Schleiermacher, for example, took a critical and scholarly approach to the text of the Bible which, to more conservative minds, undermined its authority. Fundamentalism in its various guises has been one of the consequences, with its insistence that all truth is to be found in the infallible text of the Bible, and that Christians must reject all claims to knowledge which conflict with this. But in truth it’s an old, old story. When round about 200AD the Latin theologian Tertullian asked ‘What has Athens to do with Jerusalem?’ he meant that everything Christians needed was to be found in biblical revelation and all the wisdom of the Greeks meant nothing. A great deal of Christian thinking across the centuries has been haunted by that stark question.

Tertullian’s critics answered that there were elements of Greek philosophy which were entirely compatible with Christianity, and that they could be incorporated into it. Their view won the day. A modern equivalent might on the one hand be the insistence of creationists that the Genesis creation account of the six days or calculations which date the earth’s beginnings to 4,004BC, as Archbishop Ussher of Armagh so famously deduced in the seventeenth century, is a truer picture of our origins than all that science has discovered since. On the other hand would be another response, which tends to be quieter and more thoughtful, and insists on the need for intellectual honesty. Burying our head in the sand is not a good response to the challenges of the day; we need to engage with them. Theology is not an alternative account of all that is, in the sense that you must either believe the Bible or science; it is a way of looking at everything that we discover about the universe, holding it together, exploring what

all this information and all these theories might mean for our understanding of a divine Creator. It is a way of looking at the world as we know it, with all its travails, and asking how our understanding of a divine and human Redeemer relates to them. It is a way of looking at intractable problems and immovable obstacles, and wondering what this implies for our understanding of a Holy Spirit who breaks through locked doors and into closed hearts.

That is why I have always been fascinated by the account of Paul preaching to the philosophers of Athens. Fortunately for him, he received a less heated reception than the early LMS missionaries, when he addressed them as they met on the Areopagus, the hill of Mars, to discuss the latest ideas. It represents one of the few moments in the New Testament when the earliest Christians try to find common ground with the greatest minds of the day, heirs to all the splendours of the civilizations of Greece and Rome. It must have been like you or me going to commend the Christian faith to the assembled scientific establishment of the Royal Society. Paul can't talk about the prophecies of the Hebrew Scriptures because they revere the wisdom of their past, not someone else's, so he has to find another tack. On his way he has noticed an altar dedicated to an unknown god, and this is where he begins his preaching of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. As you might expect, most are unimpressed, a few want to hear him again, and even fewer become believers.

This encounter is important for us because it shows Paul trying to make connections between his faith and where the greatest thinkers of his age are. He doesn't, for example, denounce them for their idolatry; he quotes their own poets to suggest to them that Greek and Roman minds have already understood that God cannot be limited to times and places or represented in human creations. At the moment I'm reviewing a book about angels and demons in the New World: how European traditions were imported by Catholic missionaries in the sixteenth century and were assimilated into already existing native religions. The great defender of the rights of the native populations against the conquistadors, the Dominican friar Bartolomé de las Casas, used Paul's mention of an unknown god in this same passage, to argue that the Incas already had an understanding, if a shadowy one, of the Christian god, whom they worshipped under a different name. Alas, few of those who came after took this

seriously, as they set about destroying shrines and idols and killing off whole populations by the sword or through imported disease.

There is too much navel-gazing in the western church, and that is never a good form of evangelism. One of the areas we need to reclaim is the theology of creation, not as an alternative account to that of science, but as articulating a distinctively Jewish and Christian understanding of our life on earth. The urbanisation of the west, from the industrial revolution onwards, has weakened the link between the Gospel and the natural world around us, celebrated in earlier centuries by all kinds of rituals. Some of them, no doubt, got rather out of hand and the Puritans certainly did not like them, but the instinct was a good one. Nowadays, it is neo-paganism which has filled the spiritual gap that enables people to reconnect with the land. We need to be clear that this is a connection deeply rooted in our Christian traditions; not in the sense of worshipping spirits or performing fertility ceremonies, but as an attitude of respect and reverence for the earth in an age when unchecked greed and exploitation can do it great damage. Some people will say that this is mere romanticism and nostalgia on the part of townies, but I disagree. From Plough Sunday on the first Sunday after Epiphany, when the village plough was brought into church to be blessed, through the season of Rogationtide on the days leading up to the Feast of the Ascension, when congregations went out into the fields to pray for a good harvest and when the bounds of the parish were beaten, to Lammastide in August, when the first loaves baked from the new harvest were blessed, the Christian year has been linked with the rhythm of the seasons and the growing of food.

There's nothing magical or superstitious or pantheistic about such celebrations. Their purpose was and still should be to encourage an attitude of carefulness and attentiveness to what we are doing, to acknowledge our dependence on the gifts of nature, and to help human industry work in harmony with nature. That's where a green theology begins. I can't tell you whether or not it can answer in a single sound-bite questions about fracking or GM crops; but it does ask us to look at such issues in a broader context than that of narrow, short-term economic gain. We have done so many things to the planet which have proved to be disastrous, like the widespread use of DDT after the Second World War, chronicled so tellingly by Rachel Carson in her

1962 book *Silent Spring*. We have the capacity to learn from these mistakes. But the pressures on the earth's resources with a vastly increased population make it the more urgent that we do not cause further long-term damage. The use of water, the nourishing and the stability of the soil, the cleaning of our increasingly polluted and acidifying oceans, the harvesting of renewable sources of energy, are all hot political topics, but for Christians they also belong to the theology of creation. The good stewardship of creation is our spiritual responsibility and we need to weave it back into our beliefs and our actions. It is one of the many areas in which the collaboration of science and faith, technology and theology, can be fruitful and a force for the good. In this little congregation we can't solve world-wide problems. But we can be mindful of them in our prayers and in the way we live and worship, as we affirm our commitment to honour the earth which forms us and sustains our material lives.

You might think it odd that I have spoken so much about our material environment. That's another sign of the schizophrenia which afflicts the Western mind, the divorce of the material and the spiritual. They don't belong to separate compartments of existence, not for Christians, anyway. To be truly spiritual is not to rise above the material or, worse still, to despise it; it is to be alert and sensitive to the way in which each is bound to the other. That's one of the gifts of our sacraments: being born of water and the Spirit; being nourished by the fruits of the earth and the labour of human hands, as the vehicles of Christ's undying love. It's all of a piece with the place the Christian story began, at least on earth; in a stable in a town under occupation by a foreign army. There the Word was not proclaimed as an idea or a theory, when God reached out to embrace our world, to heal its hurts but born among us, flesh of our flesh. That Word did not float around on a cloud of disembodied spirituality telling us to feel good about ourselves; it dwelt among us, full of grace and truth, and preached the love of God in fields and villages and cities, to those who had ears to hear. That same Word, crucified and risen, stands among us now, in undimmed power to heal and to redeem. But do not look for that power in palaces and fortresses. Look for it where it has always been and you will find it: out and about in this world of ours, where people and places are damaged, calling us quietly, gently to reclaim and restore their beauty and their grace.