

Wheatley United Reformed Church
 Advent Sunday 2012 (Year C)
 Jeremiah 33.14-16; I Thess. 3.9-13; Psalm 131 (not set); Luke 21.25-36)
 Baptism of Constance Mary Angharad Bullard

‘Truly intelligent families living round about the city of Oxford, had, and even to this day have, a habit of naming their male babies after the books of the Bible, in their just canonical sequence; while infants of the better sex are baptized into the Apocrypha, or even the Epistles’. Thus wrote R.D. Blackmore, best known as the author of *Lorna Doone*, in his forgotten novel *Cripps, the Carrier*, set in the 1830s in the village of Beckley, where the truly intelligent Bullard family now resides. Clem and Louis will be grateful not to have been called Genesis and Exodus. The Apocrypha and the Epistles offer better possibilities for baby girls, but Constance takes her name from a virtue - firmness of mind or purpose, being steadfast, resolute.

As to who Constance is, there is no doubt; though she will spring many surprises as the months and years pass. No doubt she will develop a mind of her own: there may be signs of that already. But what of constance the virtue? Sometimes obstinacy can be masquerade as firmness of purpose. But that’s not what the biblical virtue of constancy, which in the King James Bible usually appears as steadfastness, involves. It’s the same word, standing fast, only from a Germanic, not a Latin root. It’s found in the moving words spoken by Naomi’s Moabite daughter-in-law Ruth, widows both, as Naomi returns to her ancestral home, Bethlehem. Ruth insists on joining her, in what for her will be a foreign country: ‘Intreat me not to leave thee, or to return from following thee; for whither thou goest, I will go; and where thou lodgest, I will lodge: thy people shall be my people, and thy God my God’. The narrator adds that when Naomi saw that Ruth was ‘steadfastly minded to go with her, then she left speaking unto her’. Here, it’s Ruth’s determination to abide by a decision which involves leaving behind all that was familiar and dear to her, her sad heart pictured so memorably by Keats in his ‘Ode to a Nightingale’, ‘when, sick for home,/ She stood in tears amid the alien corn’. Her constancy will, of course, be rewarded in ways she could never have imagined. It is seen, too, in the face of the first Christian martyr,

Stephen, who, as he is about to be stoned to death, ‘looked up stedfastly into heaven, and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing on the right hand of God’. Its source is located by the author of Hebrews in Jesus our great high priest, ‘an anchor of the soul, both sure and stedfast’. Constance here suggests living true to one’s deepest beliefs, by being anchored in something greater than oneself and more secure than the pleasures or fashions of the moment.

Such examples do not depict the virtue as standing above the inconstancies of life but as to be experienced in the midst of crisis: the exile of Ruth, the martyrdom of Stephen, the swirling waters which at any moment threaten to overwhelm the boat. I always get a bit nervous on Advent Sunday because the readings come with a heavy dose of apocalyptic: signs and portents, the Son of Man coming on the clouds, all those things which fantasists thrive on as yet again they predict the end of the world, and which literalists who have no understanding of the biblical language of metaphor and symbol interpret so crudely. And yet we have a keener, if more secular sense of apocalypse than most of our ancestors. We know all too much of wars and rumours of wars, and if fear of a nuclear holocaust has been replaced by terrorist attacks out of the blue, mass extermination through biological weapons or epidemics for which there is no cure remain the stuff of nightmares. Was I the only person who was reminded by the recent flooding in Lower Manhattan of the first signs of disaster in *The Day After Tomorrow*? There’s a whole genre of novels and films which depict dystopias, societies in which civilisation has broken down, or humans are fighting a losing war with deadly robotic intelligences. Fear of the collapse of everything which has provided order and stability to our lives is a real one, and millions of humans, past and present, have experienced it as fact, not fiction.

Constance will in due course have to come to terms with our troubled world, so full of the most amazing human achievements on the one hand and of the most appalling barbarities on the other. Baptism is no guarantee that she will be protected from the darker side of humanity. But it is the sign of entrance into a community whose values are the very opposite of the destructive forces abroad in the world and the self-

destructive ones in ourselves, however often it has -we have? - acted the part of Judas and betrayed them. Those values are rooted in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, and Christians are called to be constant in practising them. They run counter to much that we learn from society around us. They do not accept that the gifts of God in creation must be so unequally distributed, so they question significant parts of our economic life. They do not accept that hatred and revenge must govern us when we are wronged, so they teach the liberating power of repentance and forgiveness. They respect the differences between individuals as gifts of God and look to allow the potential of each to flourish accordingly rather than conform to some inappropriate stereotype. They break down the prison walls which keep us trapped in the ways of selfish, greedy and hurtful living. They work for healing where there is hurt, and they tell us that evil must be confronted and can be overcome, however great the cost. It is those values and the community that remembers and cherishes them into which Constance has been baptised. In it she will learn that there is a better way than injustice or violence, and she will have the opportunity to grow into them as a child of grace.

So far so good. Does it all sound too easy? You don't get crucified because you are nice to everyone. You don't get strung up because you tell people what they want to hear. The way of Jesus is a way of seeing through the quick fix and the easy answer, of unlearning the ingrained attitudes which cause us to hurt ourselves and to judge and condemn others. It is built on a faith which does not accept that the worst human beings are capable of is the end of the story, and of that belief the Resurrection is the fundamental sign. This faith does not deny the weight of despair and sense of hopelessness which can engulf us, since Christ knew them too, but it holds before us the hope that in the midst of darkness the light will shine. It's not that Christians are any better at following this way than others: sometimes they may be, often they are not. It's simply that here, in the Christian community, is the one place where week in, week out, the values of Christ's way are recalled and celebrated, in word and in sign; the one place where we come to sit under their discipline, learn his other way, grow

into his likeness. It is this alternative community into which Constance has been baptised, and it will always be here for her, as it is for anyone who finds in the words and deeds of Jesus a more compelling model for living than complacent self-interest or cynical acceptance of the way of the world because we can do nothing to change it. Christian constancy has nothing to do with digging in our heels or standing still while everything around us is in flux. It is all to do, as John Bunyan say so memorably, with discipleship on the move. That is its paradoxical and thereby liberating nature. It takes its cue from a person, not a theory, and can only be practised by following in his steps, wherever they may lead. Today we heard Paul praying that his Thessalonian friends increase and abound in love for one another, and strengthen their hearts in holiness. That is a recipe for constancy, as long as you don't make the mistake of confusing holiness with churchiness. We heard Jesus telling his disciples that when the world lurches from one crisis to another they are to stand up and hold their heads high, because their redemption is drawing near. That is a harder kind of constancy. But I for one cannot imagine what worth a religion would have if it had nothing to say to us when we lose our way or are overwhelmed by events. That is why I pray for Constance as I do for all of us, that we may be rooted and grounded in the One who is the still centre of this turning world; who does not flinch from confronting the evils in our midst; and whose grace brings healing and hope even when the darkness engulfs us. May his light shine for Constance as a beacon to guide her through the perplexities of modern living. May it give us the courage to live by its power, small and weak as a baby, eclipsed on a Cross, glimpsed but barely believed among the early morning dews of a garden on a third day.