***The Temple of God: a Home for all Creation.***

A sermon for Evensong at Lady Margaret Hall Chapel, Oxford

15th October 2017

Robert Thompson

Kings 8.22-30

Matt 21.12-16

Snow

Louis MacNeice

The room was suddenly rich and the great bay-window was

Spawning snow and pink roses against it

Soundlessly collateral and incompatible:

World is suddener than we fancy it.

World is crazier and more of it than we think,

Incorrigibly plural. I peel and portion

A tangerine and spit the pips and feel

The drunkenness of things being various.

And the fire flames with a bubbling sound for world

Is more spiteful and gay than one supposes—

On the tongue on the eyes on the ears in the palms of one's hands—

There is more than glass between the snow and the huge roses.

Louis MacNeice, “Snow” from The Collected Poems of Louis MacNeice.  Copyright © 1967 by Louis MacNeice

“World is suddener than we fancy it.//World is crazier and more of it than we think,/Incorrigibly plural.”

This begins as a tale of two church buildings.

The first building is St Clement’s Church in the parish in which I serve. The russet bricks stretch forward from its Victorian past as it sits squat and diminutive at the foot of Grenfell Tower. The cold and cladless edifice stands there, 24 storeys of variegated ashen greys and blacks, cowering chalkily over the church below. On June 14th, as the fire still raged, the Vicar simply came and opened the doors and put on the lights, and the survivors and the displaced, the bereaved and the distressed, the vulnerable and the volunteers, from all ethnic, social and economic backgrounds, of varying genders and sexualities, of all faiths and none, just came and helped and met human need with human kindness.

The second building is St Sepulchre’s Church at Holborn Viaduct. It’s a 19th century neo-Gothic pile with a wide, welcoming and roomy space. It nestles under the chromatic and glass towers of international finance houses in the engine room of the nation’s economy. Traditionally its the Musicians’ Church where Sir Henry Wood once played the organ but whose ashes now lie below its aisle. This church too attracted much media coverage over the summer. The Vicar announced that musical bookings and concerts would no longer take place there in order to better facilitate the specifically religious mission of the church.

It is undoubtedly a media caricature of more complex dynamics in both communities, but nevertheless this summer St Clement’s was reported to open up and provide a sanctuary to the needy world around it, whilst St Sepulchre’s was seen to close it’s doors to the musicians who had until then found there a welcoming home. One church was depicted as a location of radical inclusion whilst the other was a site of expulsion.

Our readings this evening address this ability of religious buildings and communities to be the location of either radical inclusion or exclusion.

In our Hebrew Bible reading we hear how King Solomon built a temple to the glory of God. But the rest of the story of the books of the Kings tell us how he also introduced a centralised system of taxation, an extensive bureaucracy, a national army, and a priestly elite to run the national shrine. The Temple quickly became the tangible symbol of his centralisation of power; it both represented and fostered a hierarchical, static, and monarchally controlled style of religion. The institutionalism of the temple served the political authoritarianism of the monarchy

But the elitist, exclusive and exclusionary Temple cult had its own Hebrew critics. The prophet Jeremiah links the Temple with injustice and calls for a more moral and less ritualistic faith. In Jeremiah 7:11 we read: “Has this house, which is called by my name, become a den of robbers in your sight?” It’s a critique which can also be found in 5 sustained chapters of the prophecy of Ezeikal (8-11). Overall the Hebrew prophets have an ambivalent attitude towards the Temple. At once they see that it can be a sign of God’s presence, a place of worship and a call to be faithful to the Covenant that God had made with Moses. But they also saw the Temple as a place that could domesticate God, and strangulate more diverse religious traditions and make them serve the powers that be.

The Temple in Jesus time was the Herodian reconstruction of the second temple that replaced the first. Like the first Temple it was not simply the religious centre of Judaean life, but it was its economic and political centre too. The Imperially controlled King collected his taxes here to give to Rome and ruled his people from its shadows. As William Herzog puts it in his book *Jesus, Justice, and the Reign of God: A Ministry of Liberation* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2000, p.133) “The religion of the temple was always political religion with economic consequences, because the temple was an instrument of the policies of the ruler and the ruling class.”

Jesus’ attitude to the Temple’s religious, economic and political symbolism echoes the ambivalent one of the Hebrew Prophets. In Luke’s Gospel we hear how his uncle Zechariah, the father of John the Baptist is a priest; how his parents bring him to the Temple to give thanks for this birth; how he comes on pilgrimage to the Temple when he is 12 years old. Yet Mark’s account of Jesus’ life offers a narrative framework that posits him at odds with the Temple cult and portrays this conflict with its religious and political institutionalism as overt and ultimately fatal. Whilst the Temple represented the centralised power of a Jerusalem elite which was based on hierarchical power which stratified others according to degrees of ritual impurity, in Mark Jesus’ radically inclusive ministry is seen as taking place Galilee. Here on the geographic margins Jesus is depicted as bringing those on the edges of the religious purity scales into communion with himself.

In his condemnation of the Temple cult in Mark 11 Jesus echoes the Hebrew prophetic critique. He directly quotes Jeremiah 7 and says that it has become ‘a den of robbers.’ He cites Isaiah 56 and calls for the Temple to be ‘a house of prayer for all nations.’ This citation is particularly significant because Isaiah 56 is the climax of an oracle that represents the fullest vision in the Hebrew Bible of a fully inclusive Israel in which foreigners are depicted as flocking to Jerusalem. Jesus combines the radically inclusive vision of Isaiah with the prophetic emphasis on keeping the Covenant in right relationship with God and with other human beings. It’s a moral vision of faith that prioritises ‘mercy over sacrifice’, words of Jesus which he directly takes from the prophet Hosea.

Jesus’ radically inclusive message critiqued the Temple system. In our gospel reading Jesus, as we commonly say, ‘cleanses’ the temple. But the Gospel makes plain that this is a story not so much about the eviction of the money changers, rather it is a story about how those on the margins are brought in, how the excluded are included. In this story the Temple is rested to call us to the worship of God; the worship of a God who is always on the side of the poor, the widow, the children, the sick, the foreigner, the marginalised, and the excluded. The building calls us to the worship of the God who brought the people out of their slavery and to the land flowing with milk and honey.

This evening’s tale of two contemporary church buildings in London and of two historical Jewish temples in Jerusalem gives us much fuel to fire our thinking about the call of the two Archbishops of the Church of England for a new Radical Inclusion in the Church’s common life. But the one thing that I want to note is that there is nothing new about radical inclusion. It’s not only that its as old as the teaching of Jesus and the Hebrew prophets before him, but it goes back even further still. Jesus and the Hebrew prophets do not see themselves as teaching anything new either. Rather they see themselves as restoring what was the original vision of faith that the people of Israel were given through their forbears. In the end its about restoring a vision of faith that was there from the very beginning, when, as the writer of the creation myth tells us that, God breathed into every single human person and brought them to life. Or to put it another way: in the beginning was the particularity; in beginning was the diversity; in the beginning was the plurality of a creation that reflected God’s own loving being.

Louis MacNeice’s poem *Snow* encapsulates this. Here in a single scene the winter snow falls but the summer roses are blooming. “World is suddener than we fancy it.//World is crazier and more of it than we think,/Incorrigibly plural.” Here the tangerine’s many segments are devoured and its pips spit out and we with the poet feel “The drunkenness of things being various.” Here MacNeice simply spells out how the world is. He’s writing in the mid 1930’s against the background of the rise of totalitarian facism, Hitler and Mussolini are on the ascendant and we are one year before the beginning of the Spanish Civil War. The fire in the grate of the poem, as well as in the theatre of politics, tells him how the world can be more ‘spiteful’ as well as ‘gay’ as one supposes.

MacNeice casts light on the darkness of exclusionary and ultimately deathly world-views by reminding us of our original diversity. It’s a light that we in the West are in particular need of recovering at present with the rise of white supremacy in Trump’s America, of the far right in Germany and Austria, of a neo-Francoist centralised government, of the religious right in general, and of the the totalitarian economic and political systems that may well have been, in part, the cause of the fire in Grenfell Tower.

As Christian we believe that in the teaching, the life, the death and the resurrection of Jesus, to quote another of MacNeice’s poems *Pluarlity,* “the world should find its voice for good and God become/ Incarnate once for all.” It is in in following his call that we realise that the world, that creation, is simply not one but “World is other and other, world is here and there.” God, incarnate, in the flesh, is both in the particularity and the diversity of all creation.

So this evening we pray:

May all our Church buildings and communities be opened up.

May the temples of our bodies and relationships be opened up.

May our religious, political and economic sanctuaries be opened up.

And may we hear the chorus of “Hosanna” to the One who comes in David’s name.