

Brancepeth Sermon 29 September 2019

*Open our ears, O Lord,
to hear your word and know your voice.
Speak to our hearts and strengthen our wills,
that we may serve you today and always. Amen*

I find it is best, in life, to apologise early, and often.

So: I'm sorry. I'm really, really sorry –

but I'm going to have to talk about Brexit.

This has been quite a week.

We are living through extraordinary political turmoil.

And however bored you are of the topic,

however much you reach for the remote

to change channel when it comes up,

however much you think it is a topic that

does not belong in church —

I am going to have to talk about it this morning.

The God we worship, the God we pray to,
the God to whom we witness
is Lord of every part of our lives.

And that includes our politics, the way our nation is run,
our relations to our international neighbours – all of it.

It's difficult to talk about, of course, because we differ.

I'm not going to ask you your vote, Leave or Remain –
but I assume that we did *not* all vote the same way.

The basic choice we faced was one where,
as well as any number of bad arguments,

and distorted information,

and prejudiced motives,

there were also multiple different dangers to be avoided,

multiple different good things worth preserving

multiple different principles to honour.

There was *not* just one way of thinking about it,

not just one way of weighing up all these pros and cons,

and coming to a decision.

That doesn't mean we simply now have to agree to differ.

This stuff matters: whatever happens,

a lot of people's lives will be changed,

for better and for worse,

and there are some outcomes that will do a great deal of harm.

Our disagreements are real, the stakes are high,

and it is *inevitable*, it is *right* that we will keep on arguing.

It is important to take serious things seriously...

But ...

We have gone way beyond taking things seriously.

We have gone way beyond challenging one another,

arguing with one another,

holding one another to account.

We have gone way beyond

advocating for the principles we care about,

and warning of the harms we see.

It is *not* okay to demonise the people we disagree with.

It is *not* okay to call them traitors, or enemies of the people.

It is *not* okay to stoke the anger of crowds

that we won't be able to control.

It is *not* okay to dismiss evidence

just because it doesn't fall on our side of the question.

It is *not* okay to ridicule other people's fears.

It is *not* okay to stop asking who is in harm's way,

and how they might be protected.

It is *not* okay to lie.

It is *not* okay to let our disagreement turn into hate,

our persuasion into propaganda,

our argument into attack.

I looked at the news this week,

and to be honest I felt sick.

It feels like we are being sucked into a dark place,
a place ruled by lies, by hatreds, by naked power,
and that there's nothing I can do –
there doesn't seem to be anything *any* normal person can do
– to get us out again.

The situation has been created,
and it goes on being stoked,
by all kinds of actions, by all kinds of people –
but it seems to have taken on a life of its own,
and it is swallowing us.

And *that's* why I'm talking about this today, in this sermon.

Let me explain.

Our second reading was from the book of Revelation
or, to translate the title differently, the book of *unveiling*.

It's a book in which the author, John,
shows us what is really going on
what is going on behind the scenes of our world.

Now, I'll grant you that's not obvious.

We had a reading about the superbly named Michael
with all his angels,
about war in heaven,
a great dragon thrown down,
about the devil come down to earth with great wrath.

That passage may be many things,
but 'clear' is not one of them.

It's hard to think of it as *unveiling* anything.

But John is painting colourful scenes
filled with imagery that his original audience would have *got*;
he's using images from the bible,
but also images from the politics of his day –
images that people used to describe the power of Rome,
the authority of the Emperor.

It's political imagery.

Let nobody tell you that Jesus wasn't political.

You don't, after all, get executed as a dissident
by the political leaders of your time
if you're not political.

Let nobody tell you that the New Testament isn't political.

Every time it calls Jesus 'Lord',
it is pitting him against the power of the Roman Emperor.

And Revelation may be the most political book of all;
it is packed with political imagery,
and political ideas.

But John uses all this political imagery,
to show us that what we *think* is going on in our world –
well, it's not the whole story.

And what he wants to tell his readers is this:

Don't give in to despair: The victory is already won

Yes, things are bad.

Yes, the world is in the grip of processes we can't control.

Yes, we seem to be caught by the thrashing tails

of the big political beasts of our times –

Yes, we seem to be being eaten up by forces

that devour everything around them:

forces that harm and divide

forces that stoke hatred

forces that get people killed.

Yes, that is all going on – but it isn't the *deep* story.

All of that is just *the thrashing around on earth*

of an enemy who has already been defeated in heaven.

Don't despair: The victory is already won.

The victory that has been won is not a military victory.

It's not a victory of superior strength.

It's not a victory won by shouting louder.

It's not a victory won by deceit, or by hatred,

or by demonization.

It is, instead, *the victory of the lamb*.

It is the victory Jesus won on the cross.

The victor is Jesus of Nazareth,
who refused to play the games of power;
who sided with the poor, the weak, the voiceless.

The victor is Jesus,
who would not return violence for violence,
or exclusion for exclusion,
or hatred for hatred.

The victor is Jesus – who could certainly argue,
and who could call out injustice where he saw it,
and who could be forthright, and loud, and even angry –
but only with those who erected dividing walls,
only with those who tried to keep others *down*,
and keep others *out* from God's blessing.

The victor is Jesus,
the one who walked with the weak,
sat down with the despised,
and ate with sinners.

When we meet this Jesus,
we can say what Jacob said in our Old Testament reading:
Surely God is in this place – and I did not know it.
And we can understand our Gospel reading,
where Jesus described himself in words
that echoed Jacob’s vision –
a vision of a ladder of angels joining heaven and earth –
*because Jesus’ life is a place where we can see
heaven touching earth,*
if we have eyes to see.

Jesus’ life is a place –
Jesus’ life is *the* place –
where the power of God is present on earth,
where the *victory* of God is present on earth,
and that power is stronger than any power we face.
That power has won the victory already.

We live in a world powered by dark forces,
and it's easy to despair when we see
how strong they are,
and how weak we are,
and how little we seem to be able to do to stop them.

But the victory is not ours to win; it is already won.

We don't have to make all the difference.

All we need do,
all we *can* do,
is to refuse to throw in our lot
with the forces that darken our world:
the deceit, the demonisation, the division.

We may not seem to achieve anything
in our little acts of witness;
they may seem like gravel thrown against bulldozers,
but the victory is not ours to win.

It is already won.

We don't have to make all the difference

Whenever we walk in Jesus' way,
whenever we act out Jesus' love,
whenever we speak Jesus' peace,
whenever we stand up for the weak,
whenever we stand up for the poor,
whenever we stand up for the immigrant,
whenever we stand up for those under attack,
whenever we refuse to pass on lies,
whenever we refuse to demonise those with whom we disagree,
whenever we refuse to give in to hatred,
we witness to that victory,
 we point to it,
 we act it out
in the midst of a world that doesn't know about it yet;
we unveil it for people.

And whenever we do that,
in whatever ways we can, however small:
heaven touches earth.

In the midst of all this hideous Brexit mess,
you can sometimes hear the voices of those
who refuse to get sucked in
to the diseased pantomime of it all,
and who instead work patiently,
doing what is in their little power to do,
to make sure that the voices are heard
 of those whose lives are being harmed;
to make sure that that the poor, the weak, the sick,
 the immigrants, those without a voice or a vote,
are not forgotten as we trade our arguments and insults;
to make sure that our fragile systems
 of deliberation and accountability don't collapse;
to make sure that those who are busy driving us into hatred
 don't get it all their own way.

And even though these little actions get swamped,
and seem to make no difference,
heaven touches earth wherever they happen.

The victory is not ours to win;
it is already won,
and we don't have to make all the difference.

Often, all we can do is *witness*

Point to that victory

Unveil it for a moment.

And whenever anyone *does* witness to that victory,

to the victory of Jesus the lamb,

however weak their witness –

angels ascend and descend to mark the place

because heaven has come to earth.

Father, make *us* channels of your peace;

Where there is despair in life, let us bring hope,

And where there's darkness, only light.

In the name of your Son,

the Lamb who was slain, the Victor,

Amen.