

Sermon Preached at Westminster Abbey 30th October 2016.

Lamentations 3, 23-33; John 11, 32-44

LWD: God is good! All: All the time.

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Amen.

From time to time I visit the diocese of Cameroon in central West Africa. I am always enlivened by the enthusiasm of the worship. The exchange we have just had is often found in African worship, not least when the preacher feels he is losing his congregation during the 50 minute sermon. You will be encouraged to know that I will not be using up the next 50 minutes of your precious life, but I hope what I say might affect the rest of your life!

What strikes me at such African services is that the people are so utterly poor and so many of them in dire everyday circumstances. Yet with cheerful hearts they will shout out 'God is good!'. They may be poor in material terms but they are not impoverished spiritually. This is a stark contrast to those of us who live in the West – we are materially rich but spiritually impoverished.

The richness of the faith of the poorest people in society should not surprise us. We are told in scripture that this is so, not least in the glorious words of the Magnificat where the Blessed Virgin Mary sings out the melody of the Kingdom of God – 'he hath filled the hungry with good things; and the rich he hath sent empty away.

At present we are surrounded by images of great desperation. In the last few days we have seen the refugees and migrants being cleared from the so called 'Jungle' in Calais. One group have been relocated to the village of Chardonnay, where one local resident commented, 'What will the refugees do here? There isn't even a shop in the village'.

Migrants on a massive scale are seeking to escape the deprivations of warfare, violence from Daesh, fear, and the collapse of any reasonable state structures. Despite all this we so often hear the most desperate people in the world speaking from their hearts about their dependency on God. God is good, whatever their circumstances.

We have 2 pictures to wrestle with. There is the idealistic vision of Paradise, what we might call the 'garden of delight', and the real picture of the appalling circumstances in which so many people's lives are engulfed.

Such a polarity of visions is presented in scripture. The choir this evening really did sing an anthem about the 'garden of delight' – I am a flower of the field, a lily of the valleys'. Not words the preacher can use of himself perhaps, 'as a lily among maidens; as a garden fountain, a well of living water, and flowing streams from Lebanon.' (Song of Songs 2, 1-2, 14,15)

Here we have a vision of loveliness, of fertility, of beauty, an oasis of rich human experience and hoped for aspirations. Would that those streams could flow more effusively through the refugee camps in Lebanon today as they struggle to feed and water hundreds of thousands of refugees from Syria.

We have here in the words of the anthem a biblical vision of paradise, of all that humans hope for and dream of. It is a vision that is part of the

theological structure of the great world religions, the vision that there is something greater and more magnificent to experience when a life is lived with God both on this side of the grave and beyond it.

This vision is the Christian good news. In previous centuries and decades this message has been one that has been more readily listened to, but more recently we have lost the engagement with things hoped for, and this is affecting the church's ability to relate to and mission our nation as once we did, with rapidly declining church numbers as a consequence. Rather radically I think people have not abandoned the church, but the need for the message.

So many people in western societies are surrounded by so many beautiful things that we cannot see beauty; we are so comfortably off that we cannot hear the strengthening, the comfort, of the gospel. Yet, there is a divine and human alchemy in the Christian gospel that is greater than much fine gold, or silver, or even botox. This gospel cannot be like a private possession; we cannot order it 'on-line' for next day delivery; we cannot bank it, or quantitatively ease it; or win it on a Lottery or in on-line bingo, and alleluia! It is not affected by Brexit! We are distracted from the God who is good all the time.

Yet in this picture of our society we have so many who share in none of it – and it is getting serious. At the far end of our rather wonderful churchyard in Cirencester we have a cluster of trees and bushes. Four or five homeless men have set up a little camp, with their tents supported by the nearby trees. Every now and then I get a letter of complaint about this – you know the thing, 'disgruntled of Cirencester' – wanting me to remove them from the churchyard. I resist every time.

These men have recently been joined by someone who was born in Hungary, and when I recently spoke to him saying that life has been better for him, his response was 'it could be worse.' He worships with us twice a Sunday and despite his circumstances he still loves God, and doesn't blame God in any way. 'I've worshipped God every Sunday all my life in good times, why should I not do it now'. Here is an example of the 'one who puts his mouth in the dust (there may yet be hope)' as our reading from Lamentations s expresses.

God is good, no matter what happens to us. He is not a God kept for the good times, and for some types of Christian churches a God of success and prosperity, a Trump Towers sort of God. God's goodness is to be discovered by us in the Cross, and only in the Cross is there the imprint of new and resurrected life.

When Martha and Mary summon Jesus to the tomb of their dear late departed brother, grief and mourning have overwhelmed them and the crowd that has gathered. If Jesus had been there Lazarus would not have died – maybe God has not been good after all. Out of his compassion, the compassion of his divine heart, Jesus weeps along with them, and experiences their grief. This experience is one of the Cross. Yet he knows that this will be a moment for God's renewing glory to be revealed. 'Unbind him and let him go' (John 11,44)

Out of the picture of death, tears and desolation, there emerges the unbinding, liberating vision of the 'garden of delight' at the centre of which is the garden fountain, the well of living water, the fountain of life. Come, come with me, come all of us together and drink from it, and have life in abundance. (see John, 10,10)

So let's end as we began:

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All: All the time.

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Amen.