

Hymns: 443 “Come, let us sing of a wonderful love”
 154 “Come, divine interpreter”
 748 “Glorious things of thee ae spoken”
 564 “O thou who camest from above

Readings: Acts 7:55-60
 1 Peter 2:2-10

“THE CHALLENGE”

We’ve had an old friend with us for most of the last week. She’s a remarkable person. Her name is Fran Reiter and she describes herself as a “secular (very secular) Jew.” We met 20 years ago when we were both giving a lecture at an international conference. At that time, she was deputy mayor of New York and soon left that post in order to run the re-election campaign of Rudy Giuliani to his second term of office as Mayor of the Big Apple. Fran and her dear mother Shirley used to worship with us regularly. Shirley’s ashes are buried in our memorial garden. A plaque announces to the world the last resting place of “a Methodist Jew”.

Fran has never been as frank, in all the years of our friendship, as she’s been this week on the subject of religion. “I believe totally in God,” she says, “but religions all religions, have screwed up.” This lovely Americanism deserves a pause to allow it to sink in. Then she went further: “Christianity should have swept the board as far as religions are concerned. No other faith can hold a candle to Jesus Christ. His teaching, everything he stood for, could have changed the world. Love God, love your neighbour – what better or purer or more accessible teaching can there be? But Christianity,” she added wistfully, “like all the others, like the religion of my own people, has demeaned itself, drained itself of all that is most compelling about it. It’s gone the way of all flesh.”

Quite a conversation! And a good place to start. For the letter of Peter makes an attempt to take Christianity into its second generation. For the first time, its values and ideas had to be “sold” to people for whom Jesus was history. And there are lessons that can be learned from Peter’s approach to this question of intergenerational transmission.

“Like new-born infants,” he writes to his correspondents, “long for the pure, spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow into salvation – if, indeed, you have tasted that the Lord is good.”

Pure, spiritual, milk. As opposed to what?

As opposed to malice, guile, insincerity, envy and slander – that’s what. It’s interesting that that list of ungainly and miserable values and practises is shown in

the first verse of the chapter from which our reading came – a verse omitted from the recommended reading for today.

Undoubtedly, for Peter, this was a time of change. Today we'd call it a "paradigm shift". The systems available were not ready for it – hence people needed milk, pure milk, spiritual food, - simple and strong sustenance.

Only slowly could the body be build up for stronger meat. And then, suddenly, the metaphor changes. Those who've drunk the milk of Christ's teaching will become strong enough to be called "stones", even "living stones", capable of being built into something of substance:

- a chosen race;
- a royal priesthood;
- a holy nation;
- God's own people.

These worthy, noble outcomes; these edifices built of "living stones"; can only fulfil their purpose, according to Peter, when Christ himself is the cornerstone. He alone can hold such a building, such a structure, together.

So it was a time of paradigm shift. So too is our contemporary world. We're living in a generation that seems to have lost touch with Christ, and that's dangerous. Judeo-Christian values have undergirded much of western civilisation over the centuries. That infrastructure seems to have perished and I'm not sure we're ready for the consequences.

I began by mentioning a friend from New York, let me now mention another friend who lives in Cape Town. He's just written to us. It's a thought provoking letter which includes the following paragraph:

[Barbarism] – the ascendancy of self-worship, crudity, and shameless amorality over longstanding values and virtues – is upon us. we should not be surprised; it has been coming down the pike for some time. William Sangster once said that a nation's ethics and civility can only outlast religious faith by two generations, so it seems to me that when the tested faith foundations that have buttressed our best efforts towards social justice are abandoned and replaced by whatever we feel like doing and saying next – [barbarism] cannot be far behind. When ethical teachings that hold our darker fears, hates and prejudices in check are scorned and robbed of their currency, someone as manifestly empty of virtue [as some of our contemporary leaders] will emerge as a reflection of our lesser selves. Their emergence compounds the damage by giving implicit permission for like-minded minions everywhere to behave with equal disdain for honesty, decency and honour.

That's as good a summation of the crossroads at which we stand in our contemporary world as I could possibly find.

I'm not very clever when it comes to pop or rock music. But I did form an admiration during the 1990s for a group of Welsh college boys who called themselves "The Manic Street Preachers." I remember one of their most famous albums. It was entitled: "This is my truth, tell me yours." That's as good a gloss on what we have come to call "post-modernism" as you can get. If we can get away with something, then that's fine. If we believe something's true, all well and good. My truth belongs to me and can be justified in the public place. In the same way, your truth has its own standing in the marketplace of ideas. There's no overarching truth that holds us all together, against which we can bounce our ideas in our attempt to live them out. No wonder, in the absence of this meta-narrative (which Christianity provided for so many centuries) we don't quite know how to shape the world in which we live.

For Christians, there's only one way to rise to the challenge of our age. We must, first of all, change our diet. We need to build up our inner selves. We need to drink milk again like babies, the pure milk of the gospel. We must keep our eyes fixed on Christ. We must try to picture the Jesus of Galilee, the purity of his teaching and the courage of his example – in a word, Jesus before he got "screwed up" by religion.

Then we must get our structural engineers and chartered surveyors in. We must ask them to check out the buildings we've been living in. Are they constructed with truly living stones? Is Christ really the cornerstone of the edifices within which we live and breathe and have our being?

And when we've discerned the truth – the true truth not fake truth – then the hard work begins.

We are in the middle of a General Election campaign. The major parties are about to produce their manifestoes. Boil each of them down and they'll say the same thing – vote for us and all this will be yours. There's something of folklore and fairy tale about our electoral process. People seem to invite us to "have a wish". Then they pretend to wave a wand over us with the promise our wish will come true. If, of course, we vote for them. The tendency to think in this way, to take the public as fools, to indulge in the language of wishful thinking, can be illustrated perfectly by a visit to Blackwells bookshop in Oxford. It's the best bookshop in the world. So imagine my surprise when, on leaving it recently, I was confronted by a huge sales display for Harry Potter Knick Knackery, trifles and faddish items, for which (it seems) there's an enormous demand. The array of wands was bewildering – they come in all shapes, sizes and prices. We love Harry Potter and his ability to wave a wand over nastiness and turn it into something more positive.

So the challenge for Christians, and especially for the Christian preacher, is to persuade ourselves and our congregations that only lives based on Christ, only the hard work of Christian living, only societies built on Christian values, can offer hope to the world.

So we must say a big NO to malice, guile, insincerity, envy and slander.

And a big YES to all that makes for societies that have the characteristics of:

- a chosen race;

- a royal priesthood;
- a holy nation;
- God's own people.

This will be a costly and demanding process.

It will be a challenge.

And one we must face with courage.

Amen.