

EASTER 5 2010

The following sermon was preached by the Revd Canon Michael Roberts

at St Bartholomew's on 2nd May, 2010

It's difficult for a native Briton not to have been absorbed by the run-up to this Thursday's election, even if not enchanted by it. Unlikely on Friday morning will even the winning party supporters be singing, "Things can only get better", which greeted a victorious Tony Blair in 1997. There was a sense then of expectation, excitement of better things after the Thatcher / Major years. Britain today seems deflated – not merely economically – and disillusioned. Talk is now of a seismic change in the political landscape. Well, perhaps, but disappointment and *lack* of expectation seems nearer the mark. The much-vaunted trio of TV encounters between the three main leaders appeared full of sound and posturing, signifying very little. But as one young party activist said a couple of days ago, this is going to affect my life and the lives of those my age for many years to come. And he was probably correct, though there's a sentiment around of 'the same old, same old', despite all the talk of change. Everyone is aware of the *need* for change but without much idea of how it might be.

The readings address this dilemma rather nicely. Let's take that famous passage from Revelation, often read at funerals; a new heaven and a new earth. You would think that's what's being promised in the political manifestos! "The first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more", says St John; 'sea' then was a shorthand for chaos. Sea is powerful and chaotic and potentially overwhelmingly destructive, as those living on the coast of Charente Maritime experienced only a few weeks ago. What God brings, says Revelation, is order and

calm, a bringing-about of deliverance from all that threatens to engulf us. Think of the story of Jesus walking on the Sea of Galilee during a storm whilst his disciples were in fear and despair; 'Peace, be still'. Revelation is what's called apocalyptic literature, concerned with end-times. In our days we have an edgy relationship with such thinking; we can't conceive of such a thing, knowing the solar system is billions of years old *and* has a lot of life left in it, but yet at the same time have some vivid sense that we are in the process of bringing some sort of cataclysm upon ourselves. We can't agree on the dangers, so we can't agree on any action. And that's very uncomfortable. We want to reach out for solutions but don't have much idea of how to do so. There's a story early in Genesis about a tower of Babel, Bab-El meaning 'God-Gate'. It tells of human beings trying to build a city and a tower with its top in the heavens, an old-fashioned attempt to grab power independently of the divine, to storm heaven itself. To *be* god. With a wonderfully understated irony, the writer describes that God had to *come down* to see what mortals had been up to. And their aspiration was the very cause of disintegration and splintering. That's exactly why Judaism values the Sabbath. Because once a week, they deliberately lay aside all attempt to control creation. They celebrate the life *given* in creation *to* us, not made by us, and know that the responsibility we certainly *do* have is set within the context of not being able to control time. Time is in God's hands and we are subject to that reality. It's a concept that secular humanism understandably finds both irritating and exasperating. There's a book by an American undertaker entitled 'The Dismal Trade' in which he makes the clever observation that our capacity to deal with death is in inverse proportion to the size of our TV screens. The fact of our dying, of death, is not subject to genuine control, despite our tinkering around the edges. "See, / am making all things new", says God, "I am the Alpha and the

Omega, the beginning and the end”. This is less about change than about transformation, which is precisely the message of Easter and resurrection. *Not* the same old, same old.

The first reading from Acts describes Peter’s seismic change from being a narrow-minded follower of Jesus to a leader of a genuinely broad church, that is, God has a special relationship with *all* of humanity, not just with the so-called circumcision. For Peter it entailed initial perplexity and then anger at having such a cherished identity challenged. But it’s no longer good enough to have a blinkered view of who belongs, who can belong; all are equal before God. One of the sadnesses of listening to the political discussions for a Briton living in the EU has been the extraordinarily limited sense of what it means to be a citizen of the world. Christianity will have none of this narrow nonsense. We belong to the Catholic – i.e. universal, worldwide – Church and our citizenship embraces much more than nationalism. For Peter it was a true conversion from the impossibility of anyone other than a Jew being special before God to the new reality – one, of course, that had always been – that in Christ there is neither Jew nor Greek, neither male nor female, neither slave nor free. This is the world we are invited to live in, the world we are invited to assist in bringing into being. But it is the *Spirit of God* that enables such generosity of the human spirit. By fallen nature we are partial and desire just us and ours to be special. “What God has made clean, you must not call profane”. Sounds clear enough. We require more than change, we require transformation.

Of the many extraordinary tales from the formation of the Jewish self-understanding that Christianity inherited, that of the Ten Commandments and the

golden calf are central. Moses goes up Sinai after the initial revelation of God's law to all the people and is away for forty days and forty nights, a period of time familiar to Christians in Jesus' temptations in the wilderness. They have already heard them all, including the first two commandments; '..you shall have no other God before me / you shall not make for yourself any graven image'. But their patience lasts no time at all, despite this new covenant and the experience of being delivered from slavery in Egypt. They demand from Aaron, 'Come, make gods for us...as for this Moses, we do not know what has become of him'. They use whatever gold they have to make an image similar to those made by the people around them; the desire to be like everyone else is very strong. Moses comes down from Sinai with the Ten Commandments now written in stone, a sign of God's permanent upholding, and finds the people have already thrown over what had been achieved for them and by them at such great cost. It's a recurring theme in Scripture; our lack of capacity to be faithful to what we have already experienced that's transforming and readiness to throw it over for old forms of security that actually mean nothing. The change we mostly long for is the slavery we purport to long to escape from. "Who will deliver me from this body of death?" asks Paul in Romans. And the answer is immediately, "Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord".

And that is effectively the message of the short gospel reading. Christ himself will no longer be apparent to his disciples in the old way. It isn't clear yet what shall be. They will have to be patient. Meanwhile, there is a new commandment, one that fulfils the old law; "I give you a new commandment that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you are to love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another". The

challenge is for us to desire transformation, that which comes from the Spirit and will direct us into all truth, rather than the change which is either neophiliac (the love of the new for its own sake) or in fact, like the golden calf, just the same old, same old. And on that choice between change and *transformation*, yes, everything depends.