

Sunday 21 March 2010 – The Fifth Sunday of Lent, Year C

Isaiah 43.16-21; Philippians 3.4b-14; John 12.1-8

<http://bible.oremus.org/?ql=40951568>

This sermon was preached to inform the congregation of the PCC's decision to withdraw the faculty petition for the Lang Kirk 21 building development project and to reflect on an appropriate response by the local church community.

Our reading from Isaiah reveals the anonymous Isaiah-prophet addressing the exiles in Babylon. In a wonderfully poetic passage, the writer draws on the images of the exodus from Egypt and the wandering in the wilderness. These are the memories of the people who have been displaced from their homeland in Canaan and taken to a place where they didn't want to go.

Yet, even as the prophet lifts these memories from long ago, he calls on the faith community to forget them. Not even the great liberation from Egyptian bondage is an adequate model for the redemption God is about to bring to his people. God's grace cannot be constrained; God's grace cannot be defined; God's grace is beyond human understanding. And God's people are left having to trust in this love, this grace.

There are times when all God's people find themselves in exile; in a place which they are certain is not their final destination. At these times God's people have to dig deep to find the strength and courage to go on being faithful to their Lord and their God, hanging on to their trust in God's love, in God's grace.

We, at St Andrew's, find ourselves once again in a strange, uncomfortable place, a place of exile. Many of you, if not most of you, will know that the PCC, and the Lang Kirk 21 project steering group in particular, has been wrestling for some time now wondering where the ongoing – some would say, protracted – legal process was taking us; and leaving us.

In a nutshell, you will remember that the project began in earnest in early 2004 with the appointment of Nick Rank as our new architect. Public meetings were held in October 2004 after which the Building Development Group worked hard with the architect, the Diocesan Advisory Committee and the national amenity societies to develop the scheme ready to submitting for faculty in the spring of 2007.

The display of the formal public notices triggered lots of letters of objection from local residents, their families and friends and 11 of them opted to become formal objectors. Our faculty application was thus formally contested and we were drawn into the long legal court process.

The first judgement from the Chancellor was delivered in October 2008 which was somewhat of an odd judgement. "I am prepared to grant a faculty," the Chancellor said, "but not until you have raised the money."

"But," we said, "we can't raise the money until we have got a faculty." A classic Catch-22.

So we decided to prepare a reduced scheme which addressed many of the concerns of the objectors and amenity societies and one that we hoped would allow the Chancellor to make a decision without further undue delay. This you may remember was submitted last July.

Unfortunately our hopes were not to be realised. We had to wait until December to learn that the Chancellor wanted to hold another directions hearing for the purpose of deciding how to proceed with the case.

We were told in early February that this hearing would take place on 20th February. Suffice to say that the PCC had already decided to hold an extraordinary meeting on 25th February to review the situation and consider our future intentions.

I will simply say about the hearing on 20th February that the Respondents had taken it upon themselves to send our plans of last July to the amenity societies – English Heritage, the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings and the Victorian Society – in spite of the Chancellor's decision that he did not consider that further consultation was necessary at this stage. Due comment was made about this by us but not taken up by the Chancellor. At the hearing the Respondents continued to oppose most aspects of our proposed scheme and the Chancellor duly decided that a further round of representations by the Respondents and then by us should take place before he would then give a further judgement.

I think it is honest to say that what happened on 20th February simply served to confirm to the PCC what we probably already knew in our hearts. It had become clear to us that this long protracted legal process with the continuing strong objections by the Respondents had left us as a church exhausted and drained of hope.

It was also clear to us that, even if the Chancellor had said he would grant a faculty for our scheme tomorrow, the chances of being able to raise the monies needed to complete the work had become, sadly, but realistically, very small.

Given all this, and recognising that the PCC had to do what it believed to be in the best interests of the congregation and the ongoing mission and ministry of the local church the PCC, at its meeting on 9th March, resolved, without dissent, to withdraw our faculty petition for the Lang Kirk 21 project.

For some of you this news may come as quite a shock, for others I expect, it will not be a total surprise.

Please be assured that the decision to withdraw the faculty application, and therefore close the door on our Lang Kirk 21 project, was not taken lightly. All our discussing and taking the decision itself was done in a spirit of prayer, desiring to do what we believe is best for us all here at St Andrew's.

The PCC also resolved to move into a period of considered reflection about our short, medium and long term future. We have decided that it is right that we concentrate on the mission and ministry of the church for the next two years and give time for reflection and for other alternatives to be considered.

So...where does this leave us, where does it leave you? Shocked, surprised, disappointed, confused, angry, sad, numb. For some, maybe for many, not quite sure.

Clearly for all of us, in some way or other, this news that our Lang Kirk 21 project is now no longer - no, let me use the right words and say it...our Lang Kirk 21 project has died - clearly for all of us this news is painful; we have once again as a church community experienced a loss, a death.

Not of a much loved member of our church family - and I am very conscious that today falls between two funerals of long standing church members, Pam Brown and Betty Hawkins - but the death of a vision, of a hope that has been around for a long time and a hope that for so long seemed alive and so possible.

Pictures can sometimes be helpful at such times and I have found myself playing around with the image of the Lang Kirk 21 project having received a fatal blow back in October 2008 and ending up on a life support machine. By mid autumn last year some of us were beginning to wonder if the time would come when we would have to face the awful decision of having to turn off the life support machine. I think, in a sense, this is what the PCC was asked to do at its meeting on 9th March. How we wished the outcome could have been different, but we knew, deep down, that it was the right decision and had to be taken, painful though it was to do so.

What now then? Well, my immediate concern is how are we going to respond to this news, both as individuals and together as a Christian community.

I am well aware, as you will be too, that when a death has been a shock, or even when it hasn't, that we are prone to find all sorts of questions popping up. Why? Whose fault? Couldn't you have tried this or that? Who failed to do what? There will be lots of questions...of course there will be, and rightly so.

But...we have to be very careful how and where we ask our questions. When we suffer a loss there will inevitably be some, if not a lot, of anger around. Anger can very easily translate into the 'who's to blame' type questions. Let us be very careful here. Let us remember that next Sunday is the start of Holy Week when we will journey with Jesus the Lord on the way to the Cross. That is the place to deal with our anger, at the foot of the Cross of Calvary; not, I urge you, in the face of the person or persons or institution you may have decided to scapegoat.

Yes, the PCC has noted its serious concern about the way the legal process has been executed; yes, the Respondents have continued to raise, what we might consider to be, petty objections which have caused the process to drag on; yes, the Chancellor gave what we consider to be an odd judgement in October 2008; yes, to lots of other points you might rightly raise.

But, I am going to be honest here, and say that yes, we have made mistakes along the way. Internally, as the BDG, as the Lang Kirk 21 steering group, we have not always handled the process in the best possible way. Of course, if we knew then what we know now, we would have done certain things differently; at times we might have behaved differently.

So...think very carefully about how you are going to respond to this sad news. Do not be quick to apportion blame; do not be quick to condemn.

Some might ask if the vision was right in the first place; were we too ambitious; was it ever God's plan for this place? Again, I would simply urge you not to be too hasty in asking such questions. Perhaps our gospel reading might remind us that God deserves only the best, not second best.

Personally, I am content that the project was of God; it was God who gave many of us a real passion for the project, God gave us a vision and God gave us hearts full of hope. Sadly, that vision, that hope, will not be realised.

As you go from church this morning please take a copy of the statement which will give you more details of what has happened since last July and, importantly, gives the full text of the two resolutions passed by the PCC on 9th March.

I would ask you read the statement carefully and then prayerfully consider what questions you have and what comments you might want to make in response. It would be really helpful if you could put these questions and comments down in writing and let me, or any member of the PCC, have them.

There are also copies of this sermon if you wish to take one.

Of course you will also want to talk about all this with your friends. If you want to talk to me about where it has left you, then I will be here in church this afternoon and next Sunday afternoon between 2.30 and 4.30, up at the east end. Please come along and off load if that would be helpful. You might want to just come and spend some time here by yourself in the nave.

I am aware too that the news will get around our community fairly quickly and local people may stop you and ask you about what has happened. I would encourage you to feel able to talk about the facts of what has happened and why the decision was made but try to avoid getting sucked into a long debate about, again, whose fault was it, who was to blame.

It's time I drew to a close. I simply remind you that we are here as followers of Jesus, followers of the One who lay down his life willingly as the forgiving victim, the One who taught that only non-violence will break the cycle of violence that binds so much of humanity.

And from our second reading, the words of Paul. "I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death, if somehow I may attain the resurrection from the dead...so, forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on towards the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus".

Let us press on in faith and hope and love.

Amen.