

Evensong 23rd September 2012. “Heritage Sunday”

Lessons: 2 Kings 4:8-37. Psalm 107:1-32. Matt 6:1-6, 16-18.

Tomorrow is the public holiday known as “Heritage Day”, a date chosen, if my memory serves me right, as a sop to Chief Buthelezi and the Inkatha Freedom Party, as this had been a day of significance for the amaZulu. Shaka was something of a brutal tyrant and imperialist in his own way, as were the British who ultimately conquered the amaZulu and most of the rest of southern Africa too. Subsequently, a major theme in our heritage has been the struggle of the conquered people against their British and Afrikaner rulers, culminating in the settlement of 1994. Not much in our heritage there for us to celebrate – though we might manage to weave into that tapestry of conquest, exploitation and injustice, a thread of Christian mission, as brave men and women brought the faith, literacy and health to the conquered and the poor, and latterly preached a gospel of reconciliation with justice which contributed a lot to that peaceful settlement.

If you read the plaques on the cathedral walls – and especially if you are able to penetrate the modesty strips of marble which cover the more offensive bits - you might well feel that the role of the Anglican church in particular was to bless, justify and honour those who died in the British imperialist cause. And you would be right. So what is one to say on Heritage Sunday. As is said of each new electronic gadget, “When all else fails, read the instructions” - the lessons set for today (fortunately in a modern translation, not in fractured, oriental English!)

Our lessons this evening provide us with some guidance about how we should view our heritage, both recent and distant. The lesson from the Second Book of Kings is a welcome break from the litany of Israel's kings, most of whom “sinned in the sight of the Lord and were gathered to their ancestors” after a few years on the throne of David (who, if truth be told, was no great example to his people either). The story of Elisha and the Shunammite family is like a shaft of light, of goodness and love, in an otherwise almost endless sequence of sin and judgement. The village of Shunem is in the hill country of Israel, south west of Galilee, and the couple who provided accommodation and generous hospitality to the prophet were not poor, indeed, she is described as a “great lady”. They recognised his gifts and he reciprocated by successfully prophesying that they would have a son. The miracle of a late conception was followed by a miracle of healing and the Shunammites vanish from the subsequent history of the region. Antony's lament over murdered Julius Caesar - “The evil that men do lives after them, the good oft lies interred with their bones.” - is turned on its head in this story.

Our heritage as a Christian community in Africa not only has echoes of the Church Militant, chanting “:Onward Christian soldiers” as we followed the imperial standards into darkest Africa, ousting the Arab slavers with the zeal of newly converted slave dealers. It also includes the Elishas, the kindly folk who brought the Bible, literacy,

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and the two greatest contributions to preventive health care – cotton cloth and tea. Cotton cloth is easily washed, so hosts far fewer verminous parasites than skins, and tea demands that one boils, and therefore sterilises, the water that one drinks. This is a part of our heritage that we can recall with pleasure, if not exactly pride. Cotton cloth and tea were accompanied and followed by many other gifts from the cornucopia of European learning and technology – not always to the benefit of the recipients. Cotton cloth and tea – keep them in mind, as we look at the New Testament reading.

Our New Testament lesson is part of the Sermon on the Mount, which forms the 5th, 6th and 7th chapters of St Matthew's gospel. The section which was read this evening is a gentle warning to those who like to advertise their piety so that all around will know that they are good Godfearing people. Prayer is, first and foremost, a conversation with God. While it is good that we should celebrate God's gifts to us together; bring the needs of the world, our community and our family of faith to God in the context of worship, and receive the peace and mercy of the Lord in blessing, it is in our times of personal prayer that we come closest to God. Most often those times of prayer are silent, as we listen to God. When I was in high school, I would sometimes go cycling with my Dad. We would ride, side by side, or in line ahead, enjoying the scenery, barely saying a word to each other, mile after mile. That was when I was closest in spirit to him and we knew, without a word being said, that we loved one another. That, Jesus told his listeners, is how it should be in our quiet times with our heavenly Father.

The teaching about prayer is underlined with the teaching about fasting – to which we might reasonably add other forms of personal sacrifice such as caring for the needy and giving alms to the church or to good secular causes – two matters which we should be thinking about this month of pledge planning.

But what has all this to do with celebrating our “Heritage Sunday”? Our lessons are about doing good and leading a life of faith quietly. While the Shunammite woman and her husband were doubtlessly overjoyed at the recovery of their son, and probably had a bit of a party to celebrate, Elisha went quietly on his way. Their happiness was his ample reward. Jesus teaches us – and all who listen – that our relationship with God and our relationships with our neighbours are not matters about which we should seek publicity and boast.

Likewise, our celebrations of our “Heritage” should be modest – as Winston Churchill is alleged to have said of one of his political opponents, “Mr Attlee is a modest man – but then, he has much to be modest about.” We can indeed celebrate our spiritual ancestors who brought the Gospel to Africa and led the campaigns to abolish slavery throughout Africa and the world – remembering, of course, that slavery was a part of the Christian society throughout its history until the 19th century and that conditions of employment in many businesses owned by Christians are not much better today. We can celebrate the introduction of cotton cloth, tea, literacy,

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wheeled transport and a host of other labour and life-saving developments – remembering that those innovations were often associated with beliefs about the intellectual and moral superiority of those who brought them - the curse of racism in the “doctrine of Ham” which blights our continent still. Our heritage is as much our burden as it is our glory and we need to acknowledge that whenever we are tempted to boast.

The ancient Greeks recognised two opposing forces which might help us to make a sound judgement about our “glorious heritage”. There was *hubris* – excessive pride in ones achievements and power which enabled one to conquer and humiliate others. And there was *Nemesis*, conceptualised in female form as a goddess of extreme antiquity, whose role was to counter *hubris*. Hence the old saying “Pride comes before a fall.” Celebration of our heritage is a temptation to *hubris*, overweening pride in “our” achievements (or, more often, the achievements of others, including our murderous and slaveowning ancestors). I am reminded of a story told by an anthropologist who I knew in Cambridge. She was sitting in a stream in the Amazon river, cleaning vegetables with some local women. One remarked how lovely the glass beads were that she was wearing. “Oh,” replied the anthropologist, “we make a lot of them in England.” “Let's make some,” said the Amazon woman. The anthropologist suddenly realised that her friend knew of nothing in her own culture which she and her friends could not make for themselves – the English woman had not the slightest idea how to make glass beads, let alone access to the equipment necessary to make them. Hubris – pride in her heritage – was swiftly followed by Nemesis - a reminder of her own ignorance. Our lessons this evening – well, one lesson which may be taken from them, on this our Heritage Sunday – remind us that we need to be modest in our celebrations, recognising that the cruelty, poverty, inequality and misery are as much our heritage as the good things which we remember and celebrate.

Amen.