

**The Cathedral Church of the Redeemer
The Eighth Sunday after Pentecost, year 'B'
26 July 2009
The Rev'd Leighton Lee**

When they were satisfied, he told his disciples, "Gather up the fragments left over, so that nothing may be lost.

- St. John 6: 12

In his magisterial poem "The Waste Land", T. S. Eliot writes of "these fragments I have shored against my ruins." One of the themes of this central twentieth-century poem is of the grail quest, the ancient legend of one who, while seeking the Holy Grail, undergoes tests of purity, character and dedication. Eliot uses this underlying myth in "The Waste Land" to reflect on the modern world as a place of emptiness and seems to suggest that the ancient myth of a heroic quest gave meaning and relevance to life. And so, it seems to me, the fragments speak of the last remaining vestiges of the past to which we cling in a world which is increasingly arid, barren and meaningless.

Dare I suggest that the Church itself is guilty of fixating on the past and neglecting the present, to say nothing of the future? For more and more we know ourselves to be living in Eliot's waste land; the past and all of its glories are increasingly being tossed aside in favour of – what? Perhaps because the churches are more and more infused with an acute sense of wanton destruction. The old liturgies and ceremonies have almost passed into oblivion, being replaced with much which is at best transitory and at worst puerile and there are ever more people who would rather be swept away by the bacchanal of a sports game than the splendour of the Eucharist. Not that we have been particularly good custodians of our own heritage. So often our worship is perfunctory and ordinary, insipid and uninspired. There are a multitude of excuses given as to why this should be so, the most ubiquitous being busy-ness. Life out there in the fast lane, it is argued, really precludes any of us (clergy included) from being able to really devote anything but a few moments to the considerations of worship. Now worship has become an obligation instead of an offering. And a tiresome obligation at that. There is very little sense in the contemporary Church of the *mysterium tremendum* of God. Our services seem to be either a species of therapy where the principle of what makes us feel good is employed, or a staid, unimaginative exercise in mind and spirit-numbing monotony.

No doubt these tendencies are derived from and are a reflection of the meagre and utilitarian spirit of the age. Everything in the modern world is about ease, comfort, speed, accessibility and, most lamentably, mediocrity. That these values have become supreme in the secular world is bad enough; that they have come to define the worship of the contemporary Church is a sign of our own spiritual poverty.

We need to offer to God the best we can. This is, of course true of all areas of spiritual life, and it is especially true of our worship. Earlier generations did not offer God the best in music, architecture, vesture and liturgy because these things were

beautiful and pleasing but because they represented the very best that humans could contrive. They represented an offering made at the expense of those who gave, an expense not only – or not even – in terms of money, but in terms of time and talent. And if only the best is worthy of God, then only the best is worthy of God’s people. This is not vanity, for by offering such to God and his faithful, we see a pale reflection, but nonetheless an authentic offering, that shares the achievement of the Saviour who offered everything to us and his Church. And more. It speaks of the things of which stumbling lips cannot speak: the beauty and glory and splendour of God.

Thus there is a great desire to turn back the clock and we hear quite a lot these days of reclaiming tradition. Only fools believe it possible to live in the present without any reference to the past. Our history is littered with the detritus left behind by those who thought thus. We must understand that the past is, the engine which drives us – propels us – into the future. It does not lay an absolute claim to us, but it does influence us. The history of the West since the fifteenth century has been one of the rediscovery and re-evaluation. Each age has harkened back to earlier ages and drunk deep from the wells of theological, philosophical and artistic achievement and has arisen refreshed and invigorated. We can think of the recovery of classical architecture by Vitruvius; or the rehabilitation of Aristotle by Aquinas; or of the ‘Age of Faith’ as embodied in the Gothic-revival ideals of A. W. N. Pugin; or, since we are awash in organists this morning, the rediscovery by Mendelssohn of the music of Bach.

But the desire to re-claim or retain traditions must always be tempered with a knowledge and acceptance that time marches inexorably forward. One of the lessons Canute tried to teach his courtiers was that you can sit on the beach and tell the sea to go back, but it will not. It will come in and you can either learn to swim or be swept away. And that is a painful lesson to learn for those of us who are tied to the past. So often we do not live in anticipation, but in memory. We suffer under the tyranny of the past, though it so often seems like comfort: ‘the good old days’ and ‘the way things used to be’. We obsess about the past; we nurse past wounds; we feed past anxieties and fears; we surrender to past doubts; we yearn for a return to ‘traditional’ values and norms.

The English historian Eamon Duffy (himself a devout Roman Catholic) wrote,

“‘Tradition’ has become a fraught and difficult term, invoked by self-styled ‘traditionalists’, to call a halt to change and herald a return to the forms and mindset of the recent past, rather than as a resource for change.”¹

It is no easier for Christians to embrace the future – either as a concept or a reality – (even though we glibly talk of “God’s future”) than it is for anyone else, for the future is an unknown, frightening, and undiscovered country. Even I myself am guilty of making appeals for a return to tradition; some could say – not without validity – that this place is one that indulges in *retarditaire* liturgical and musical practices. We are nothing if not a ‘traditional’ parish.

¹ Eamon Duffy, *Faith of Our Fathers*, London: Continuum 2004, p. x

Too often, however, I think we see the acceptance of the future as an ‘all or nothing’ kind of proposition: either we embrace the future in all its fullness and leave everything that is the past behind, or we reject even taking one step forward and cling desperately to the decayed debris of earlier times, thought and people. Duffy goes on to write that,

“...an understanding of the richness of the Church’s past is a liberation, not a straightjacket. The tradition offers us a point of vantage from which to criticize the present, certainly, but it also a source of confidence in launching into the uncharted future. Cardinal Newman once famously declared that ‘in another age it may be otherwise, but here below to live is to change, and to be perfect is to have changed often.’ The Church’s past, in all its complexity and contradictoriness, is abundant evidence that change, not stasis, is the sign of life.”²

When Christ speaks to his disciples to “gather up the fragments left over so that nothing may be lost,” he speaks also to us and says that we are given an awesome task which is nothing less than guarding the faith once received by the saints. This doesn’t mean that we should go about blindly – and vainly – trying to recover the past or retrench in the present. It doesn’t mean that we should meet the future with frozen alarm and righteous indignation. It doesn’t mean that all that has come before, all that has been said before, all that has been believed before, should be preserved in amber. It *does* mean that we, like the hero of the Grail legend, are undergoing tests of purity, character and dedication. It *does* mean that, armed with, and steeped in, the traditions and truths of the past we can meet the future with confidence, joy and trust. It *does* mean that the land which we thought was a waste land is still, in fact, the promised land where we are called to labour so his love and forgiveness, shown forth once for all on Calvary, can be even yet known and received.

² Ibid.