

Portishead 8th Jan 2012.

“Then you shall see and become radiant, and your heart shall swell with joy: Because the abundance of the sea shall be turned to you” Isaiah 60:5

There are some things that are so obvious that they almost ought not to be done. For example the link between today’s gospel reading and giving is so obvious you don’t need me to explain it. The kings travelled and gave of what they had. The gifts melded together to foretell the key stages in the life of Jesus and that event became an integral part of our faith. Hopefully, the giving of what we have still remains an integral part of our discipleship and that giving of what we have is reviewed, on an individual basis, each and every year. And, this is the time of year when ‘resolutions’ seem popular so let us at least resolve to think about our planned giving this year.

But, as I say, that is so obvious it should not need to be said. Rather, let’s ponder on the Old Testament reading for a few minutes and ascertain links with the “Embrace the Future” campaign that has a key element in four weeks time. I am sure that there are some links and that they will not be too contrived.

Dennis Bratcher writes, in his commentary on Isaiah, that

He (Persian king Artaxerxes) commissioned Ezra the scribe to return to Jerusalem to secure the welfare of the city (note vv. 10-11). This commenced the end of an exile that had lasted many decades) Artaxerxes funded Ezra’s mission and ordered the provincial treasurers to provide Ezra whatever he needed. (Ezra 7; Isaiah 60:5-7). Specifically mentioned is the intention to “beautify the house of the Lord in Jerusalem” (Ezra 7:27; note Isaiah 60:13). The returned exiles faced severe problems. Part of the reason was that the people had allowed sin to pervert their mission as God’s people (**Isa 59**). In chapter 60, the prophet renews the promises of a new day for the community of faith. He assures the people that God has not forgotten them and that their mission as a light to the world has not changed. The new events transpiring mark the beginning of God’s new day for His people.

So, what can we draw from this for Portishead in 2012.

It is for others to determine whether, or not, sin has been allowed to pervert the mission in this place. For what it is worth it is my view that we all need to look at this issue and ask why we do what we do. If there is any element of personal glory, or even doing something because we know that people will think that we are good people, then there is an element of perversion of mission. The prayer vigil that leads into the Gift Day will allow us all to pray and reflect on this. We can ask forgiveness as necessary – sort of doing the Lords Prayer. For, without the lead in prayer time – which many have been undertaking for some months now – the endeavour will not succeed as well as it could.

The whole passage is referring to Jerusalem in the feminine form – as if the city was a beautiful woman. Now, this is exciting imagery but we also have to lose some of our reserve to fully appreciate the imagery. It is my experience that when you are in love with a beautiful woman you will make spontaneous gestures of affection. You may buy flowers or other things that have minimal practical use other than to say “I love you”. Some of these can seem extravagant – but invariably are within the realms of personal affordability. The

passage concerns the rebuilding of Jerusalem and the development into a City that would serve its people of that time. Is that not what we are trying to do with Church buildings in Portishead? Rebuild, in part to secure the structures, but in the main to make them suitable for present and envisaged congregations. What can you give to say “I love you” within the context of the building – and can that initial thought of love prompt a reflection on planned giving as a Love for God? How extravagant is that love?

It is also interesting to reflect on the use of the words “your light; your dawn”. It is referring to the Light of God for, without that we are in darkness. Without God involved in “embracing the future” then it will also be in darkness. There is a saying that Churches should ‘Let go and let God’. Individuals should do likewise for when we do let go God will do wonderful things.

Moving on, those who can remember the entire passage will recall the phrase “The Gentiles will come to your light”. Again, relevant for Portishead. Gentiles, as we know, were those outside the Jewish faith. The new facilities, in both Churches, will make them more comfortable; more accessible; easier to understand; warmer and of a ‘come in style’ – all of which will encourage people who wish to explore faith (or return to a childhood practice of attending Church, to come in). My experience of the planning group for the embrace the future campaign is that they are welcoming and friendly as well as managing to combine openness to ideas with commitment to purpose. They don’t get distracted from the core purpose – and I guess that they are typical of the congregations here. Warm and welcoming but hampered by buildings that speak to Victorian Portishead where as the town in which we live now is somewhat different.

We can also learn something from the exhortation to lift up your eyes all around. Yes, there are economic issues affecting the country and there will be issues affecting some people within this congregation. But, for the majority of us it is a question of looking at what we have – not at what we do not have – and making a response from that. It is important that as many of us as possible make a response. The works will cost £750,000. Some Churches have raised that sum (either in cash or pledge over a period of time) in one gift day – with one such Church within in this Deanery. The number of responses will influence external grant making trusts. If we don’t respond as we can and should why should they respond to something we have not? Tough love and the reality of our time. When we can fully embrace the looking at what we have and respond as we can our whole attitude on life changes and we can become radiant and our hearts will swell with joy.

And this does bring us back to the gospel where we hear of the kings see the star and rejoiced with exceedingly great joy.

This is the first Sunday of Epiphany – the Greek for the sudden realisation or comprehension of the (larger) essence or meaning of something. This Church faces an exciting future and faces it with confidence. It does face an Epiphany – a comprehension of something larger than what is now. And, if as individuals within the Church we can take these matters on board ourselves and respond to the Gift Day as we can – with exceedingly great joy – what an Epiphany that will be for

Us as individuals

Us as a Church

Us as the community of Portishead.

Fanny J Crosby wrote:- To God be the Glory – great things He has done.

He is still doing Great Things today. Will you let Him do great things in Portishead next month? Only you can answer so now, let us pray.