

Sermon for the feast of Our Lady, after the riots of 2011

Sermon I was sorry when, a week ago I saw that the reading chosen for today, when we are celebrating the Blessed Virgin Mary, was that rather frightening one from Revelation. And the picture was a Caravaggio painting of Mary's death. Left to myself I would have chosen the more positive lesson from Isaiah and a less gloomy picture. But the week since has persuaded me that they are helpful. And this is because:

We had our bucket and spade holiday last week. The sun shone, the beach at Lyme was full to overflowing with happy families; mothers — and equally fathers — with children ranging from babies to independent 'youth', grandparents and hangers on. People of every age class and condition being made equal by shared (partial!) nakedness. There was good natured physical chaos everywhere, upheld by social order. Everyone was looking out for the other person, even the ice cream and deckchair traders. Family camps good naturedly drew in their boundaries as more people arrived in need of a space. Lost children were corporately sought and their finding celebrated with shared rejoicing. On Thursday night there was even a torchlight procession with 200 young people and their parents wandering through the street with flaming and fearfully incendiary torches until they were safely corralled on the Cobb (For those that don't know: the cobb is the harbour wall, surrounded of course by water).

For two or three days we enjoyed this Shangri la, but news gradually seeped through of riots elsewhere and when we turned on the television which we had previously avoided we found a quite different society. Oddly it was one which also had elements of chaos, danger and (figuratively) nakedness, but this time it was very frightening; the more so for being totally unexpected. I am pretty sure that, we being in church, and me preaching, you would agree with me that these riots indicate a spiritual disease. As such, neither the police, nor politicians nor journalists will have the doubtful benefit of my advice. But it is very much our calling as Christians individually, and together as the local church, and my duty as preacher, to understand from these riots our spiritual situation and to act accordingly. Moreover, in several ways the feast of Mary and the texts chosen are a providential help in this.

Thus I will argue several points;

- first that Mary is the type not only of women but of all humans bearing the God by whom they will be redeemed,
- second that we Christians understand clearly that the death disaster and trauma by which we are surrounded is very real and being the consequence of sin, is open to redemption,
- third that — far from being passive — Mary is has the innocence on account of which humans can be redeemed from death; informed innocence, nurturing innocence, unconquerable innocence and transcendent innocence.

And yet it is in women and particularly through motherhood that we can see this innocence most clearly shown. So I shall start with the informed innocence which Mary showed at the annunciation. She didn't just say yes, she checked it out "How can that be?", not only how, but what about the social consequences? But she took the plunge, for the sake of a new life. Many of the mothers on the beach will have had their own conflicted approaches to their pregnancy, but they accepted it (and nowadays in our society it is a choice) there they were doing the job, with practical love which is nurturing innocence. You probably don't need me to tell you of the sheer self-oblation that mothering children requires. It was to be seen on the beach first and last and we could well imagine the efforts that had been made to get them all there and would be made to get them safely away to bed afterwards (notwithstanding torchlight processions!). Then there is an innocence which is unconquerable: in the light of injury, disability, unloving response and even the death of the child and of the abandonment by others, from the husband through the family to the structure of society. All this is not abandoned by mothers but held on to. It is not dealt with by aggression but lived through as did Mary standing by the cross and by her peers coming to the tomb early in the day to care for the body of their, and our, Lord. Finally, and consummately, there is the transfigured innocence of a presence with God where all relationships are healed:

My Soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord,
My Spirit rejoices in God my saviour.

Mary has that innocence on account of which humans can be redeemed from death. We know very well that, in the words of the Breton fisherman's prayer, "our boat is so small and the sea so great"; and that we are only just afloat. Where the world is aghast at the possibility that the political economic consensus may not actually be safe (robust in the present cant!) we, we are not in the least surprised. We even read in an everyday church service that

A dragon stood before the woman who was about to bear a child,
so that he might devour her child as soon as it was born.

But we also read that her child was snatched away and taken to God and to his throne. It is in innocence that the woman and her child were saved and we are to be and will be saved.

What was particularly nice on the beach last week was the participation of men, it might be swimming or surfing, or fishing, or sandcastles or just soaking up the sun companionably. It was clear to me that the innocence — informed, nurturing, unconquerable and transcendent — was as much needed and provided by men as women. So let us widen the proclamation of Mary to the whole humanity. (And probably in the same

way the prophetic voice of John to be as much the province of women as men, but I will leave that sermon for another day!)

In his epistle James has said that

True religion is to keep oneself unstained by the world;

that is, innocent, by the grace of God: understanding, accepting, nurturing, holding on, and - by the power of the Holy Spirit at this present time - with a sure hope.