

Lent 2 Year A Leicester Cathedral

Gen 12: 1-4a; Rom 4: 1-5, 13 – 17; John 3: 1 - 17.

The wind blows where it chooses John 3: 8

As the Archbishop of Canterbury and the Church of England have discovered recently.

Take a scholarly lecture on the place of sharia law in the English legal system

Mix with the Islamophobia and Anticlericalism of much of our culture

Put it on a lunchtime news programme wanting to set the news agenda and

Give it a lurid 'adoption of sharia law unavoidable, Archbishop says' headline on a BBC website with 13 million hits a week

And you have a news hurricane.

17,000 emails immediately flooded back into the BBC, and onto the websites of the Times and Telegraph. The tone of the emails was crude and aggressive: the language of the street. For some time cultural commentators have noted that emails tend to be written like the spoken word: hurried, unpolished, exaggerated, emotional. And written down. And forwarded.

The news hurricane did damage: to ++Rowan, to the Church of England, to relationships between the faiths, to trust between human beings. It will take time to discover exactly where the greatest impact will have been.

The wind blows where it wills. The Jesus of John's gospel is talking to Nicodemus, one of the many who will come to him because of his signs. And Jesus responds with a pun. *Pneuma*, the Greek for wind, also means spirit. So does its Hebrew equivalent, *ruach*. Ruach is the wind, or spirit of God, brooding over the face of the waters at creation. And God gives ruach, breath, to the people upon the earth. In Genesis we are told of God breathing life into the nostrils of 'adam: a wonderful image of *suscitation* (I don't think it can be resuscitation). And ruach is

not necessarily gentle: it quells the great flood so that Noah survives (Gen 8.1), it divides the Red Sea so the Israelites are freed (Exod 14:21), it picks the prophet Ezekiel up and sets him down in another place (Ezek 3.12,14)

This wind is powerful, life-giving, and certainly not tame.

It is always the ruach, the wind of **God**, the spirit of **God**. Not simply a natural phenomenon

So was the news hurricane something to regret? Some thing to forget?

Or was it something more subtle, something which we, in this season on Lent, should understand. Was it a judgment? And if so, on who, or on what? **Where was God in this?**

Perhaps there are hints in the readings this morning.

Firstly I think there is a reminder in these readings of the need to wrestle with the hardest intellectual issues around us.

We are called to respond to God with our spirits, and with our bodies, and also our minds.

So it was that in these readings two faithful Jews wrestled with their inheritance of faith, trying to make sense of the new life they saw in Jesus.

Nicodemus, a Jewish leader, came to Jesus as a teacher, a rabbi, who performed life-giving signs to try to discover more. Jesus response was poetic, as well as punning. Jesus certainly didn't offer a simplistic response, but led Nicodemus more deeply into the mystery of faith.

Paul tussled with his own Jewish beliefs, and how Jesus might fit within the inheritance of the children of Abraham. Paul doesn't offer a simplistic response, but that in wonderful assertion: *Abraham believed in the presence of God who gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist* (Rom 4.17) draws us into the mystery of faith.

So: a question to you all: what Lent book have you chosen, and have you started it yet? Have you ever actually read anything by ++Rowan. Some of it is very demanding, and assumes that you know English, French, German and Russian. But some: for example, **Tokens of Trust**,¹ the Archbishop's Lent lectures in Canterbury Cathedral three years ago, are really pretty readable. And not simplistic, leading us into the mystery of faith.

Nicodemus and Paul were both observers of newness around them. The upheaval last week indicates at least one area of newness where the whole church needs to attend closely. Islam is now a significant presence in this country. Not only does it offer an additional religious choice. It is now also a profound catalyst of change in our religious landscape. As Michael pointed out in last week's sermon, religion is no longer merely a private matter. Moslems would say it properly does concern matters of law, of finance, of public policy. Christians would argue that it always has. But can the faiths agree? And how significant should our influence be? That is the syllabus for the coming years².

Alongside wrestling with truth is a second challenge: to continue steadfast in faith.

There may, indeed be trouble ahead. There will certainly be increased turbulence. The last week has shown that, just as computers, with their programmed dealing mechanisms, increase volatility in the world of finance, computers with their blogs and emails, also increase volatility in the world of politics. Our culture prizes hype and promotes hysteria. And then, bored, we move on to the next big thing. This is nothing new: remember the crowds who shout hosanna as Jesus entered Jerusalem....and then 'crucify' only days later.... And then simply drifted away altogether.

For Abram there was just one big thing: the Lord said to Abram: go. So Abram went. Leaving his homeland and his kindred on a journey which would last the remainder of his life.

¹ Canterbury Press: Norwich 2007

² see Grace Davie's Ebor lecture and

http://www.virginia.edu/iasc/HHR_Archives/AfterSecularization/

For Paul there was just one big thing: an encounter on the road to Damascus. And he too left his community on a journey which would last the rest of his life.

And for Nicodemus, maybe there was one big thing. He disappears from John's at this point. We don't watch what happened next, we don't get to follow his journey of faith step by step. But he does reappear, briefly in Chapter 19: *Joseph of Arimathea, who was a disciple of Jesus, though a secret one because of his fear of the Jews, asked Pilate to let him take away the body of Jesus. Pilate gave him permission, so he came and removed the body. Nicodemus, who has at first done to Jesus by night, also came, bring a mixture of myrrh and aloes, weighing about 100 pounds. They took the body of Jesus, and wrapped it with the spices in linen cloths, according to the burial custom of the Jews. Joseph, too scared of the Jews to admit his faith; Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews, too scared to come publicly to see Jesus. Now both brave enough to go to Pilate to ask for the body of Jesus, crucified as an enemy of the state. And their faith now strong enough to take responsibility for his burial, and Nicodemus' love now great enough to provide enough embalming spices to bury a king.*

No hysteria, no hype. Simple, sacrificial, steadfast faith.

The wind blows where it chooses: you hear the sound of it, but do not know where it comes from, or where it goes.

But maybe, just maybe, if we wrestle with truth, and follow steadfast in faith, we can get an inkling, as W B Yeats put it in his poem '**The blessed**', of the seer, Dathi.

**"My eyes are blinking," Dathi said,
 "With the secrets of God half blind,
 But I can see where the wind goes
 And follow the way of the wind;
 "And blessedness goes where the wind goes...."**