

# *do not lose hope*

a sermon preached on the  
*feast of hildegard of bingen*

17 September 2017

at

*st john's*

ANGLICAN CHURCH CAMBERWELL

*by father richard wilson*

the lections: Sir 43:1-12,27-28; Ps 104:25-34; Col 3:14-17; Jn 3:16-21

Today we celebrate the feast day of Hildegard of Bingen, abbess, mystic, musician and natural historian. Paradoxically, David was inducted as Vicar of this parish on the same day four years ago. Both David and Hildegard made the glorification of God their life work.

Glorification of God ought to be our life work too, although I would have to say that for me this is a constant struggle, to set aside all the distractions that do not glorify God and to direct my attention to what I claim is central to my life. What I say I glorify and what indeed I do glorify are in conflict – that's not original, of course, Paul made the same point much more elegantly.

The two Hebrew Scripture readings we heard this morning illustrate glorification of God in the natural environment. Sirach gives the sun and the moon, the stars and the rainbows divine status, calling them the heavens, the work of God. The Psalmist, more earthly, links the natural world, living things even Leviathan, the great whale to the work, purpose and glory of God. I love these words from the Psalm:

When you hide your face, they are dismayed;  
when you take away their breath, they die  
and return to their dust.  
When you send forth your spirit, they are created;  
and you renew the face of the ground.  
May the glory of the Lord endure for ever;  
may the Lord rejoice in his works (all her works).

Glory in these words means responsiveness to God and God's creation, creation that is for God's sake. Importantly, it is not creation that is glorious, it is the Creator. Creation manifests but does not replace that who created it. While Amanda and I were away this past month we were fortunate to visit some exceptional examples of God's creation. For me the highlights were the gentle beauty of the Ring of Kerry in southwestern Ireland and in different way, the southern highlands of Scotland, its monumental landscape and the vast immensity of rock.

In Paris and London we saw a fair few monuments too, but these are of a different and more troubling order. In Paris, as you know, there are any number of big things to see. As good and obedient tourists we walked the Champs Elysees from the Arc de Triomphe through to the Louvre, visiting along the way the Place de Concorde and the Arc de Triomphe du Carrousel.

The Arc de Triomphe is a celebration of the military conquests of Napoleon and of the French revolution, based none too diffidently on the Arch of Titus in Rome. Likewise, the Arc de Triomphe du Carrousel celebrates some of Napoleon's later military conquests. In between them the Place de Concorde contains at its centre, the Luxor Obelisk. A religious monument given by Egypt to the French who adopted it for their own, again imitating Roman practice by acquiring and repatriating someone else's monument.

These structures are part of the Axe historique which also includes the much more modern Grande Arche de la Défense built originally as a monument to humanity, although it is nonetheless a common site for military parades. Together they form a straight line of some ten kilometres.

These structures are, patently, monuments to human conquest. I found them disconcerting because in them the French seem to have lost sight of what ought to be glorified. They have confused the Creator with that which was created. There is no relationship to the divine, or sense of the mystical about them, they are entirely earthly, entirely worldly. To my mind they do not deserve the attention they are accorded by their many, many visitors.

Maybe I am over-critical, cynical maybe, or anti this world. Let me go to John's Gospel, this very well remembered portion from chapter 3, to correct my fault.

For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.

Far from condemning the world, John, identifies its special place with God, a place destined for salvation, not destruction. But through the incarnation, John also critiques our very human practice of glorifying the world that we have built, and ourselves, rather than God who creates us. Hildegard, as I have already asserted, understood the distinction between the glory of the Creator and that which was created very well.

Where do we sit in this conflict between the glory of the Creator and creation? This is a question about how we understand and practice our spirituality. This parish understands the tension of striving to live with a call to spiritual life while remaining in the world. It reflects the desire for spiritual growth in the Mission Action Plan. David in his ministry here tried to accompany us on a journey of development of personal spiritual practice. His ministry was a response to the Mission Action Plan's emphasis on spiritual growth in the parish.

I participated in the development of this MAP during my curacy here, with people in this congregation. Spiritual development of the people of the parish was given the highest priority by the parish council – who wrote the plan several years before David came to us. It was seen as an important part of the growth of the parish in response to the needs of our community both within the congregation and among those we seek to attract. It was also intended to explore and develop a particular expression of liberal Anglicanism that was missing from the community. Also, this plan is an expression of the desire of the majority of the parish, not some faction, not one person with a bee in their bonnet, but the wish of most of the people here.

David embraced the plan and set to work on it understanding its significance for his ministry here. However, and I will speak plainly, this plan and David's efforts to put it into action was thwarted at every turn by a minority of people who, for reasons I cannot fathom, had another agenda.

How can a minority do this? Well, frankly, because the majority neglected to stand up when a small group of people blocked them. The majority, the good hearted people did not fuss, I expect with good intention, probably to keep the peace.

I believe the majority of the people of this community still want that spiritual development that is asked for in the mission action plan. I believe the majority still want this parish to be a lively expression of a deep and spiritually-centred liberal Anglicanism. So I ask you, the majority, the good hearted and spiritual majority, given David's resignation, what are you going to do now? Are you going to allow a minority to continue to determine your spiritual life or the life in this place, or are you going to stand up in your own interests?

We are called to live life in the Spirit, as community and as individuals. The Gospel of John makes this clear. Hildegard read and lived it, so should we, as we decided. An opportunity to open up that spiritual life has been lost. However, I call the majority, the good and spiritually-inspired hearts of this parish not to lose hope, not to despair, but find your voice, and resolve to work for what you believe and what you want for yourselves and for this place.