

Trinity 9 18 August, 2019 St Mary's, Linton

For many years on my classroom door I had a cartoon pinned up which featured a bill-board with the words 'Stop and Think!' Underneath the bill-board two men look up at the words. One says to the other, 'It sort of makes you stop and think, doesn't it?'

What does make us stop and think? I mean what makes us *really* think about what *really* matters? That of course depends of what you think really matters and that's not so easy to discern.

Every age offers people dreams of things which they would really love to have. I confess I am just a little addicted to those property programmes on TV where a very nice TV presenter finds a couple their dream home in the countryside or abroad in some sunny idyllic country or some bijou town.

Every political party offers its vision of society, the dream in which we all, somehow, will get what we most desire.

Religion also is not immune from dreaming dreams; dreams of spiritual detachment from the world and finding love and joy in an inner world of bliss. Even Martin Luther King's great 'I have a dream speech' (1963) as stirring as it was, might be accused of painting too rosy a picture of a possible world.

Look at all these dreams and your own. They are your bill-boards. Stop and think.

Dreams tell us a lot about ourselves, as Freud analysed in his masterpiece on *The Interpretation of Dreams*. However, the 'royal road to knowledge' as Freud claimed for dreams, does not lead us to a fantasy world but rather to self-knowledge. Dreams are often wish-fulfilment, the workings out of desires and worries but in often bizarre and unlikely ways. Interpreting dreams, he claimed, can make us face up to what really matters.

Back in the 7th/6th century BC it was the dreamers of Jeremiah's day who provided the prophet with the bill-boards he needed to make people stop and think. Like our TV presenters the prophets offered people wish fulfilment dreams - that's why the old Canaanite religion of Baal was so much more attractive than worship of the one God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. The gods of Baal are the easy gods of material desire, not the more demanding realities of this world.

'I have dreamed, I have dreamed!' the false prophets proclaim. To which Jeremiah replies, 'How long? Will the hearts of the prophets ever turn back – those who prophesy lies, and who prophesy the deceit of their own heart?' (Jer 23: 26).

Stop and think, Jeremiah says to those who are prepared to listen. Even dreams can be wake-up calls. Nevertheless, we can feel Jeremiah's despondency: will people ever listen to what God truly demands of them or will they continue to pursue their own false dreams?

That same heart-felt frustration is expressed by Jesus in today's Gospel reading. There is something startling familiar with the bill-board Jesus describes with our own times. Society

is dysfunctional – ‘five in one household will be divided’ (Lk 12:52) for all its members are divided and in opposition with one other.

At the moment of the 4 million British children growing up in single parent families, 50% have absentee fathers. Poverty, lack of stability and crime are far more likely in these families than in others.

We understand these signs, they do make some of us stop and think, but does society go further? Does it think of the deeper underlying moral and spiritual implications? Jesus says, when you see a cloud rising you know that it is going to rain, so why are people so lacking the desire ‘to interpret the present time?’ – that is to stop and think about the moral and spiritual values which are the true glue of society but which they would rather avoid?

The answer is that many religions in general and Christianity in particular, don’t fulfil the dreams people desire and wish for. It is a frustrating business, but we can take some comfort that thus it has always been, there is nothing especially odd about our age. But that shouldn’t lead us to complacency, it just means that we all have a collective duty to make people see the signs of the time and stop and think and discuss them from the Christian perspective.

Let me conclude with one who also who found the times in which he lived frustrating, but who nevertheless preached the Christian gospel of grace which has been his legacy to the Anglican church ever since. Last Tuesday the church celebrated the life of Jeremy Taylor who died on the 13 August, 1667. As bishop of Down and Connor he did not have an easy life as he was attacked by Presbyterians on one side and Roman Catholics on the other. Often he felt his words fell on deaf ears. How often, he said in one sermon, do we

‘sit as unconcerned as the pillars of a church, and hear the sermons as the Athenians did a story, or as we read a gazette?’ (*Of The Spirit of Grace*)

The strain caused him ill health and an early death.

Despite this, Taylor’s abiding sense was of God’s grace given to us by the Spirit of truth. This for him, as it should be for us, is what *really* matters. Taylor concludes his sermon on grace:

Till the Spirit of God comes upon us, we have little souls, little faith and as little patience; we fall at every stumbling-block, and sink under every temptation; and our hearts fail us, and we die for fear of death... [that is] till the Spirit of God ‘fills us with joy in believing’. (*Of The Spirit of Grace*)

To which, I say, amen.