

ON BEING SAWN IN HALF

Some thoughts on Isaiah, Oberammergau 2000 and Armistice Day

St Laurence's Church, Ludlow
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“The Lord says, I am making a new earth and new heavens. The events of the past will be completely forgotten. Be glad and rejoice for ever in what I create”. Isaiah Chapter 65 vs 17 and 18.

“They were stoned, they were sawn in two, they were killed by the sword As for us, we have this large crowd of witnesses around us”. St Paul to the Hebrews Chapters 11 v. 37; 12 v 1.

This morning, I shall talk about the Prophet Isaiah; about this year's Passion Play at Oberammergau; about next week's Armistice Day and Remembrance Sunday; and about the experience of being sawn in half.

Our First Lesson was from Isaiah. If you want to see him, you will find his little statue in the High Chancel, behind the Mediaeval Choir Stalls on the left hand side. You will recognise him, from among all the other effigies, because he is carrying a large cross-saw.

Towards the close of the 8th Century BC, he called the people to the true God and away from pagan entanglements. After the invasion of Judah by the Assyrian despot, Sennacherib, Isaiah became an inconvenience, as a religious and political dissident. According to tradition, he was sawn in two. In the Second Lesson, taken from the Epistle to the Hebrews, St Paul picks up the fate of Isaiah, in his drum-roll listing of the martyrs and prophets who form part of the "large crowd of witnesses around us". St Paul, who was beheaded in the persecution ordered by the Emperor Nero, was himself to join the martyrs he wrote about; and is one of our "witnesses" today.

Being sawn in two, at least metaphorically, continues to be a part, sadly, of the human experience: in sickness and bereavement; in unhappy love affairs and broken marriages; in the care of children during adolescence, and the releasing of them to stand on their own feet as adults; in arguments in the Church - not so long ago, about women priests; in crises of conscience

and divided loyalties in politics and the world of work.

Much the same can be said of nations. Germany was once bitterly divided into two by the Cold War and the Berlin Wall, Checkpoint Charlie and all that. Today in Northern Ireland and Palestine and all too many other places, the saw keeps sawing and the people bleed, divided into rival groups, in societies torn asunder by human sinfulness.

And yet, for individuals and nations, we also meet healing, reconciliation and peace with justice. Ultimately, Isaiah says, the Lord is at work to make for us, if we so will, a new earth and new heavens.

Something of the sort is to be seen among our principal enemy of the 20th Century, the German Empire of Kaiser Bill and the Third Reich of Adolf Hitler.

Germany today is a law-abiding democracy, our ally in NATO, our partner in the European Union and the United Nations. We should remember British sacrifices in two World Wars next Sunday, and give thanks for the defeat of the monster that was Hitlerite Fascism. But we do well also to celebrate the release of the German people from that nightmare, and their re-admission to the family of civilised nations.

This brings me to the Passion Play at Oberammergau, a large country village in Bavaria in the foothills of the Alps, close up to Germany's frontier with Austria.

This Passion Play is performed once every 10 years. It relates the story of the last days of Christ, from His Triumphal Entry into Jerusalem to His Resurrection from the dead. The performance is given not by professionals, but by the locals themselves – the total cast of 1,600 adults and 550 children accounts for almost half the village population. They have done this for over 360 years.

My wife and I attended the performance last month. To call it impressive, as if one were a theatre critic, would be an under-statement. And would in any case miss the point. The story builds up over six hours, with a break in the middle. In the second half, beginning with the trial before Caiaphas and Pontius Pilate, the Play builds up a realism and intensity which becomes in the end almost unbearable. In the howling mobs, the platoons of brutal soldiery, the Crucifixion itself and the final emergence of the resurrected Son of God from the tomb, one has the impression almost of being actively present at the event.

When we were there, there was a huge international audience of over 4,000 people, of all Faiths and none, Japanese, Arab, whatever. Initially, they coughed and shuffled their feet and rustled their programmes, as people do. But, after a while, they fell progressively, and in the end totally, silent. Even the vastly overweight American sitting next to me, in a back-to-front baseball

cap, dispensed with his handful of Mars Bars and turned to stone. And yet, as we all filed out afterwards, it was with a sense of completeness: of a cathartic tragedy which had opened up a new vista of serenity and hope. As one Anglican theologian commented, when he saw it ten years ago, it was as if **WE** were the Resurrection!

Looking back on it, this year's Passion Play also said something about Bavaria as it is today. That part of Germany and its inhabitants do not have an entirely unsullied reputation or an ideal history. The Prussians tend to look down on them, as "Latins" of the South. Other Germans can be slightly embarrassed by them. Traditionally very jolly, in their Lederhosen and Loden jackets and funny green hats adorned with feathers and hog bristles like shaving brushes, with their cheery singing and general "Gemütlichkeit" at Beer Festivals, nevertheless there is or has been also another side to the Bavarian character. Deeply Catholic, each village vying with the next to have a more gilded and elaborate baroque parish church, they have also shown evidence at times of intolerance and callousness.

Thus, Bavarian troops joined the Prussians in the attack on France in 1870; and were an integrated part of the Kaiser's army in 1914. Even after Germany's defeat in the First World War, many Bavarians remained proudly unrepentant. You can see the evidence, if you walk among the memorials erected in village cemeteries in the 1920's, commemorating Captain this and Corporal that, who died, say the inscriptions, a "Hero's death on the Somme" or something of that sort (perhaps, some of them, to the Maxim guns of my father's élite infantry Regiment). Hitler and the Nazis were well received by Bavarians, the majority of whom welcomed the Austrian boy from nearby Linz with enthusiasm. Of course, there were exceptions, including the saintly Abbot of the Benedictine Abbey at Ettal, who opposed the Nazis and gave safe haven for a space to Dietrich Bonhoeffer. But in Bavaria, Hitler had his holiday home at Berchtesgaden. And it was in Bavaria that Germany's first Concentration Camp was set up in 1933, just outside the provincial capital, Munich, at a place called Dachau. Initially for political dissidents and later for deported Jews, 32,000 civilians were executed there by the SS, along with 6,000 Russian prisoners of war.

But the picture changed after 1945. Pretty well all Bavaria's cities and industrial centres had been flattened – including the once-beautiful medieval town of Augsburg, associated with Martin Luther, which we discovered was bombed close to the night in 1944 when the Luftwaffe were busy aiming three bombs at me in North London. Instead of waging war in other lands, Bavarians had destruction and bloodshed visited on them, on their home soil and in their own homes. Their men folk died in very large numbers. There is no defiant patriotism in the inscriptions in the village cemeteries of the late 1940's, nor proud military ranks and titles; just the initials and name and date and place (so often, Russia). At a Parade by the local equivalent of the British Legion – the Krieger und Veteranen-verein – in a village near Oberammergau which my wife and I watched, there was not a trace of the old militarism, not even in the 6 or 8 old and rather infirm "veterans" in shabby suits being pulled along in a farm cart by two fat little ponies. The atmosphere and dress was youthful, civilian and relaxed, with competing brass bands playing

popular music. At the open air Mass, attended by nearly 1,000 villagers, the Parish Priest's sermon was in celebration of peace, civil liberties and international co-operation, with a strict injunction to be welcoming to Turkish guest workers and gypsy immigrants from Eastern Europe.

All of this showed up clearly in the Passion Play, which these days is careful to include among the actors Protestants as well as Catholics, those who have abandoned formal Church membership as well as those who are still pious believers, and to embrace Muslims from among the small Turkish community. A real effort has been made to avoid any hint of anti-Semitism, so often the curse of Bavaria in past centuries. The "Anti-Deformation League", and the "American Jewish Committee" were invited over to Oberammergau, as representatives of Judaism, to make the production the result of a Christian-Jewish dialogue. Jesus is portrayed as a Jew of the Jews, within the matrix of the then Jewish Faith, fulfilling the prophecies of Isaiah and the Old Testament, as well as inaugurating a new religious era. In the Play, the Jews of Jerusalem are not portrayed as all ganging up of one accord against the Founder of the Christian Church. The crowds are divided into those for and against Jesus. Caiaphas comes across not as inherently evil, but as an all-too-human politician, driven by expediency and the desire to shore up the crumbling system which gave him his own power and importance. The Roman soldiery, disciplined but ruthless, are dressed in field grey – in effect, the uniform of the camp guards at Dachau. A nice touch!

The story of the Passion, as they put it across at Oberammergau, is recounted as in part the story of how one group can elevate itself above another and pronounce the other as inferior; of how human beings, sometimes even those who are outwardly in conformity with God, can in fact become alienated from God. To make the point unambiguous, with regard to Hitler and Fascism, the programme notes at Oberammergau contained the following:

"Especially as Germans, we have ample reason to acknowledge the pathos of the drama, because in the past century our country was the source from which flowed the horror that both spread beyond our borders and played itself out among us".

Reading this, I could not remember, from my four years as the EU Ambassador in Tokyo, anything comparable, by way of self-knowledge and public contrition, among the Japanese.

A wise priest of my acquaintance once told me that there was, in his opinion, nothing in human history and behaviour, however terrible, from which some good could not ultimately flow. I am not sure that I fully believe this. It is hard to think it of the Holocaust, for example, or of the Stalinist Terror, or of things which have happened since, such as Pol Pot's slaughter of his fellow Cambodians, or the acts of genocide in Africa, as capable of ultimate fruit.

And yet, the mercy of God is infinite. Jesus forgave his tormentors, on the Cross.

It has long been time, in the United Kingdom, among the generations which still remember the last World War, to give credit for the good things which have happened since, and to celebrate new friendships formed with old enemies. I myself was glad to do so, in my Foreign Office career, and especially in my 15 years with the European Commission, where I formed trusty and enduring German friendships. In our Ludlow Group of Six Parishes, I am delighted to find that we give a good example, in our twinning arrangements with German Lutherans.

With God's assistance, what is sawn in half can be brought together and healed. The prophet Isaiah, with whom I began this Sermon – and who knows about these things – invites us to forget the events of the past, and to be glad and rejoice in the future opened up to us by the Lord.

THANKS BE TO GOD