

Sermon: 'God's People in Strange Territory'

Revd. Gordon Newton

Methodist Central Hall, Westminster

Sunday 28th February 2010 - 6.30 pm

LESSON: Isaiah 43:14-21 & John 17:6-19

I have entitled tonight's sermon: "God's people in strange territory". I wonder what comes to your mind when you hear the phrase "strange territory". What picture does that conjure up?

It strikes me that there are probably 3 different circumstances by which we find ourselves in strange territory:

The first is when we travel, by choice, to a place we don't know in order to have a holiday or just explore. When I was a boy and my parents took me on holiday we would travel by train and then wait for a bus to take us to the house where we would be staying. Whilst we waited for the bus my father would take his purse out of his pocket and say to my mother: "how much will the bus fare be?" to which my mother would reply: "I've no more idea than you have - we've never been here before!"

The second circumstance by which we find ourselves in strange territory is when we are taken somewhere we don't want to go. I've just read a very powerful story that some of you may have read or seen, as a film: "The Boy in Striped Pyjamas". It is a story about a nine year old German boy who is suddenly uprooted from his enjoyable childhood life in Berlin because his father has been appointed Commandant of Auschwitz Concentration camp. Nine year-old Bruno is unaware of the significance of all this. On arriving at his new home he finds it is a very isolated house and he is very lonely. He eventually makes friends with a boy who lives behind the concentration camp and sits near the perimeter fence each day. This Jewish boy from Poland has also been taken away from his home and comfortable setting and is facing unimaginable horrors in his new setting. A friendship grows between the two lads because of this feeling they both have of being in strange territory. I won't say anything more about that story because it is a powerful story which I would thoroughly recommend if you haven't read it - and I mustn't spoil the poignant ending.

So we can find ourselves in strange territory because we have chosen to travel, or because we have been forced to move.

The third circumstance by which we can find ourselves in strange territory is if we stay where we are and then find that our surroundings have changed fundamentally. In 1970 I went to Yorkshire to be minister of two churches in an area of Bradford that was going through huge changes. The area where some of the older people had lived

for decades was undergoing physical change because whole communities were being demolished and new road systems being developed in order to link up with the motorway system in an attempt to help the city's industries – consequently many familiar places looked different and many people were re-housed by the council. As well as physical change these areas were undergoing great social change, too, as large numbers of people from the Indian sub-continent arrived to work in the textile industry. People whose lives had been unchanged for decades suddenly found themselves surrounded by people who looked different, who spoke another language and who made different smells when they cooked their dinners. "Strange territory" - we stay where we are but suddenly everything else around us seems to have changed.

As Christians I get the feeling that we often feel ourselves to be in strange territory in this third way – things change around us and we feel that everything operates according to new rules and conforms to different regulations, and we wonder where we are. The upshot is that we can feel insecure in our beliefs and our actions. Two quotations I have read recently crystallised this for me: Let me share them with you:-

The first you will find in the book that we are going to be using in our Lent course (based on the Cross). It comes in the form of a question in the 4th session: "In some parts of the world (such as Africa and China) Christianity is popular and growing fast. But in modern Britain Christianity is increasingly marginalised – even despised by some. To be a Christian is to be an outsider. Do you feel the force of this?"

The second quotation was in the Autumn edition of the Cliff College magazine, in an article by Piers Lane "As we follow Christ into the 21st century we are ever more aware that the Church often stands on the edge of society, with a decreasing influence on our communities, and an increasing distance between ourselves and the people God wants to reach".

We find ourselves in strange territory.

I want to direct your thoughts in two directions:

Firstly, let me give a number of examples of how this happens and, secondly, let me remind you of some of the places in the bible where God's people are in strange territory.

How do we find ourselves in strange territory as Christians?

- Well, sometimes we are ignored. In many parts of London Christian churches are involved in many significant projects that work alongside refugees and asylum seekers, offering help, practical support and legal advice. Much of this work has been going on for a decade or more. But when the Mayor's Office recently published a draft plan for how the city might respond to the situation of having many refugees and asylum seekers amongst us there was hardly a

reference to all the work that the churches are already doing. Sometimes it seems as if we are invisible!

- Sometimes we are threatened. Olive Jones was a Maths teacher in Somerset recently in the news, dismissed from her teaching job because she had offered to pray for one of her pupils who was ill. School authorities said that her behaviour could be deemed to be bullying! (Evening Standard 21.12.09)
- Sometimes we are sidelined. The General Synod of the Church of England, in its most recent meetings, "expressed deep concern about the overall reduction in religious broadcasting across British television in recent years" and "called upon mainstream broadcasters to nurture and develop their expertise to create and commission high quality content across the full range of their output, particularly material that imaginatively marks major festivals and portrays acts of worship". (10th February 2010)
- Sometimes people attempt to re-write history as if we don't have a Christian heritage.
And, in an attempt to be kind and friendly to Muslims, Buddhists, Hindus, Sikhs and other faiths, some people water down the Christian content of our national heritage, forgetting the fundamental influence that the Christian faith and the Christian church has had on the provision of education, medical care, social welfare and the shaping of our legal system. Some humanists, in particular, have taken the opportunity of living in a multi-faith society to try and drown the Christian voice.
- And the general secularisation that has infected our country has swept across Europe, reflected in the latest constitution of the European Community where there is no proper mention of the Christian faith, despite a very powerful lobby by the Pope!

Strange territory.

Life, beliefs, standards, have all changed around us.

The sum total of this is that Christian people feel in strange territory, where there is no longer a respected place for church leaders, where there is little heed for the voice of moral authority, where there is no longer an ear for what the Church might have to say, and where the Church is no longer the community to which people automatically come for the rites of passage such as baptisms, marriages and funerals.

How do we respond to this situation?

The idea of God's people being in strange territory is not new. It's almost as if there is a recurring theme throughout the bible of God's people being in strange territory.

Let me draw your attention to four strands in the bible:-

Our first bible reading tonight actually focuses on two of those strands, two occasions when God's people were in strange territory.

The first occasion was when the Children of Israel were in the wilderness, following their deliverance from slavery in Egypt. Slavery had been a bad experience. But this new experience of being free and wandering through a desert land wasn't particularly welcome. They had little security, no opportunity of settling and no chance to grow crops for their food. The wilderness experience was a difficult one, but as one writer said in a recent devotional book on biblical words:

"The history of Israel was forged in the heat of the desert. "The desert was the place of encountering God" (David Winter – Old Words New Life p.131). It was during those years of wandering in the wilderness – strange territory – that people learned what it was like to be really reliant upon God, and how essential it was to obey His commandments.

The second occasion occurred several centuries later when the Jewish people found themselves in exile in Babylon. The large and powerful Babylonian empire had attacked the southern Kingdom and the city of Jerusalem and – following two invasions, just 11 years apart, had taken nearly all the Jewish people away to Babylon. This was definitely an experience they had not chosen and Babylon was not the place where they wanted to be. Worst of all, they felt it was a god-forsaken place, and that they had left God behind. Well known words from Psalm 137 sum up the feelings of those exiles "How shall we sing the Lord's song in a new land?" But it was in those 70 years of exile that God's people learned some new and deeper truths about God, not least that He was a universal God – not confined to Israelite soil and could be worshipped anywhere! More than that, God was the God of all nations. The place of exile "proved to be a place of divine revelation" (p.22 Griffiths/Potter).

Our reading from Isaiah 43 links both those profound experiences of God's people in Old Testament times. In verse 14, God (speaking as redeemer) says: "I will send an army to bring down the Babylonians". In the same breath the prophet reminds his people that it was God who had delivered them from Egyptian slavery, and adds: "Now I am going to do a new thing – I am making a way in the desert and streams in the wastelands".

Leslie Griffiths and Jennifer Potter, writing a very thought provoking book about the current world situation ("World Without End") refer to this passage and make this comment: "Once again, in the scheme of things, the wilderness – far from representing the ultimate danger and annihilation of life, now actually becomes the precondition for God's demonstration of his unique power and faithfulness" (p.22)

Those two momentous experiences in the Old Testament story speak very eloquently about how God is present in strange territory and able to shape the life of his people and lead them into deeper faith.

Let me just leave you with some thoughts about the two strands of thought about strange territory that come from the New Testament.

The first is the story of the temptations of Jesus. The whole of Jesus' ministry was shaped by his period of preparation in the wilderness. It was a tough experience, lonely, and testing. It was strange territory – not like the comfortable, secure experience of home life in Nazareth. It was also symbolic of other occasions during His 3 year -ministry when He found Himself tested, threatened, abandoned, misunderstood and alone.

But note how Luke tells the story: For Luke, it is a "Holy Spirit" event.

At the beginning of the story, Luke tells us that "Jesus was led *by the Spirit* into the desert". At the end of this period Luke tells us that "He returned to Galilee *in the power of the Spirit*". (Luke 4:1 & 14). For Jesus, the wilderness was strange territory, not a pleasant experience, but a period for the Holy Spirit to enter into Him more fully.

The other biblical strand about strange territory from the New Testament comes from what we call the "High Priestly" prayer of Jesus that we find in John's gospel chapter 17 – our second reading tonight. In this prayer Jesus prayed for His disciples – both the first 12, and all the rest that would follow – including you and me! In this prayer He recognises that they are living and operating in "strange territory". They have come from the world – and yet they are still in the world, although "not of it". By the world, Jesus means those who are not God's subjects and who live according to a different rule.

When you get two people living side by side under different rules there are bound to be clashes. People who live according to God's rules are bound to feel the need to behave in what we often now call "a counter-cultural way".

And what is the prayer of Jesus for His disciples?

Is it to remove His disciples from the dangerous and threatening and misunderstanding world and to put them in safe territory? No – precisely the opposite. This "strange territory" is where they are supposed to operate.

"My prayer for them, Father" Jesus says "is not that you will take them out of the world but that you will protect them from the evil one".

Are you in strange territory as a Christian?

Do you feel as if God's people, the Church, are in strange territory?

Quite probably "yes".

But, if so, don't feel overwhelmed. Simply be open to God.

Remember that strange territory has been the place where God's people have experienced His provision, the place where they have discovered more of God, the place where they have been strengthened in the Spirit, and the place, above all, where God wants us to operate.