

St. Mark's, Niagara-on-the-Lake
The Ninth Sunday after Pentecost, year 'B'
25 July 2021 (proper 17)
The Rev'd Leighton Lee

In his magisterial poem “The Waste Land”, T. S. Eliot writes of “these fragments I have shored against my ruins.” One of the themes of the poem is that of the grail quest, the ancient legend of one who, while seeking the Holy Grail, undergoes tests of purity, character, and dedication. Eliot uses this underlying myth in “The Waste Land” to reflect on the modern world as a place of emptiness and seems to suggest that the ancient myth of a heroic quest gave meaning and relevance to life.

More and more we know ourselves to be living in Eliot's waste land; the past and all of its glories are increasingly being tossed aside in favour of – what? Think about the Church. Its old liturgies and ceremonies have almost passed into oblivion, in a world where more people would rather be swept away by the bacchanal of a sports game than the splendour of the Eucharist. So it seems to me that the fragments speak of the last remaining vestiges of the past to which we cling in a world which is increasingly arid, barren and meaningless.

Not that we've been particularly good custodians of our own heritage. So often our worship is perfunctory and ordinary, insipid and uninspired. There's very little sense in the Church these days of the *mysterium tremendum* in our services which seem to be either a species of therapy where the principle of what makes us feel good is employed, or a staid, unimaginative exercise in mind and spirit-numbing monotony.

No doubt these tendencies are derived from and are a reflection of the meagre and utilitarian spirit of the age. Everything in the modern world is about ease, comfort, speed, accessibility and, most lamentably, mediocrity. That these values have become supreme in the secular world is bad enough; that they have come to define the worship of the contemporary Church is a sign of our own spiritual poverty.

Thus there is a great desire to turn back the clock and we hear quite a lot these days of reclaiming tradition. Only fools believe it possible to live in the present without any reference to the past. Human history is littered with the detritus left behind by those who thought this way. In many ways the past is the engine which drives—even propels—us into the future. But it doesn't lay an absolute claim to us, even though it influences us.

The history of the West since the fifteenth century has largely been one of the rediscovery and re-evaluation. Each age has harkened back to earlier ages and people have drunk deep from the wells of theological, philosophical, and artistic achievement only to arise refreshed and invigorated. There are lots of examples we can turn to, be it the recovery of classical architecture by Vitruvius; or the rehabilitation of Aristotle

by Aquinas; or of the 'Age of Faith' as embodied in the Gothic-revival ideals of A. W. N. Pugin; or in the rediscovery by Mendelssohn of the music of Bach.

But the desire to re-claim or retain traditions must always be tempered with a knowledge and acceptance that time marches inexorably forward. One of the lessons Canute tried to teach his courtiers was that you can sit on the beach and tell the sea to go back, but it will not. It will come in and you can either learn to swim or be swept away. That's a painful lesson to learn for those of us who have difficulty letting go of the past. Much of the time we live not in anticipation but in memory. We suffer under the tyranny of the past though it so often seems like comfort: 'the good old days' and 'the way things used to be'. We obsess about the past; we nurse past wounds; we feed past anxieties and fears; we surrender to past doubts; we even yearn for a return to "traditional" values and norms.

The English historian Eamon Duffy once wrote,

"'Tradition' has become a fraught and difficult term, invoked by self-styled 'traditionalists', to call a halt to change and herald a return to the forms and mindset of the recent past, rather than as a resource for change."

It is no easier for Christians to embrace the future – either as a concept or a reality – (even though we glibly talk of "God's future") than it is for anyone else, for the future is an unknown, frightening, and undiscovered country. Too often, however, I think we see the acceptance of the future as an 'all or nothing' kind of proposition: either we embrace the future in all its fullness and leave everything that is the past behind, or we reject even taking one step forward and cling desperately to the decayed debris of earlier times, thought, and people.

Duffy goes on to write that,

"...an understanding of the richness of the Church's past is a liberation, not a straightjacket. The tradition offers us a point of vantage from which to criticize the present, certainly, but it also a source of confidence in launching into the uncharted future. Cardinal Newman once famously declared that 'in another age it may be otherwise, but here below to live is to change, and to be perfect is to have changed often.' The Church's past, in all its complexity and contradictoriness, is abundant evidence that change, not stasis, is the sign of life."

We heard Jesus tell his disciples to "gather up the fragments left over so that nothing may be lost." Do we hear him say the same thing to us? And do we understand that to be told to do this is to be given the awesome task of preserving the faith once received by the saints?

This doesn't mean that we should go about blindly—and vainly—trying to recover the past or retrench in the present. To do so would be to make the Church into an organization which is not egalitarian, not open to change, and not willing to explore.

We aren't called to preserve in amber all that's gone before, all that's been said before, all that's been believed before. To gather up the fragments that nothing be lost means that we, like the hero of the Grail legend, must undergo tests of purity, character, and dedication. It means that even if we only have the fragments of the traditions and truths of the past, we can still meet the future with confidence, joy, and trust. It means that we must gather up all those for whom this world *is* a waste land, those who are lost in pain and confusion and doubt, those whose past is neither glorious nor especially worth recovering, but whose future was wrought eons ago at Calvary—our living past, present hope, and future promise.