

ROCKY PETER HOMILIES 1

21st SUNDAY

Isaiah 22:19-23.

Rom:11:33-36

Matt: 16: 13-20.

One of the things the recent riots have shown us is our need for law and order. Anarchy may seem to offer frolics and freedom but, in truth, it simply creates the conditions in which the weakest suffer most. But law and order by itself does not hold society together; so questions have to be asked about the quality and cohesion of our social life. Over the next two weeks I want to pick up this theme and see what light faith can shed, not only on the life of our society but also on the life of the Church.

Today's scriptures are all about matters of law and order. 'You're fired!' that is the word to Shebna, Master of the Palace. 'You're hired!' that is the word to his replacement Eliakim. And, in the gospel, Jesus appoints Peter as the Rock on which his Church will be built. We are clearly here into the 'structures' of faith, what they call 'organised religion'. But frankly, at this time, we are wearied with all that – just about as wearied as we are with political life. In fact Church politics can seem as nasty, even nastier, than any others. I suppose that is because it can wrap dodgy dealings in the cloak of piety. Mind you, history from the Acts of the Apostles onwards shows that it has always been so. The Gospel has been carried by some pretty earthy earthen vessels. So we find ourselves warming to St Paul as he points us away from all this with the cry 'How rich are the depths of God' God is always so much bigger than the boxes into which we try to squeeze him.

Jesus knew only too well the frailty of Simon Peter but still makes him the Rock for his great affirmation 'You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.' Jesus surely saw that, as his followers were to reach out ever further into the world, to

embrace ever more nations and cultures, they were to need firm bones to hold them together. On this exciting voyage of adventure, Christians continue to need the stability of Rock or, as our Old Testament reading has it ‘a Peg driven into a firm place’. ‘Organised religion’ can be pretty dismal but ‘Disorganised Religion’ can be even worse. Just like anarchy it can create the conditions in which the strong dominate the weak, the articulate or charismatic exclude the silent and mediocre. One of the great achievements of Augustine Bishop of Hippo was his sturdy defence of the ‘mediocre’ against the bullying of those purists who saw a church fit only for heroes. And often, in the history of the Church, it has been boring old Bishops who have rescued the Church from being turned into an elite sect for ‘Top Christians’.

Bath has been enjoying Peter Hall’s great new production of Shakespeare’s Henry IV. That is a play very relevant to our times for it is all about the need for law and order. Shakespeare wrote these plays in an age still haunted by ‘the civil broils’ of the Wars of the Roses – of a nation turbulent and torn apart. Bolingbroke, the King, works to bring law and order to this confusion. Set over against this are not only discontented rebels, but also the enemy within, the rackets lawless underclass of John Falstaff and his mates. The drama is that the Prince of Wales, heir to the throne, is torn between these two worlds. We the audience are also torn, like Queen Elizabeth 1st, we cannot help being charmed by Falstaff’s jollity. But, in truth, this is an irresponsible dishonest world in which honest citizens get robbed. In all ways a turbulent society calls for law and order. This is handed out by the upright Lord Chief Justice who has stuck out his neck and offered no favouritism to the erring young Prince. He stands firm to defend that orderly framework in which alone all people can be truly free.

As our society goes on needing that law and order, so does the Church need the Rock, the firm peg of conviction to hold us together. Earthen vessels may be imperfect but we still need

them to carry the Gospel treasure to the ends of the earth. It is, when you come to think about it, a bit of a miracle that this goes on happening, that such treasure can be carried by such a shambles. It is, of course, 'Sola Gratia' by God's grace alone.

Of course this does not mean that we should simply take secular or sacred law and order as they are. The earthen vessels can be shaped more nearly to the demands of the Gospel. Eliakim is given real authority but he must use it like a Father. Peter is a happy man in his confession of faith but, before he opened his mouth to make this confession, he had obeyed the call to listen. 'Whom do people say that I am?' That was the first question, which Jesus asked. Peter has had his ear to the ground. The ear of Peter comes before the Mouth of Peter. And, in the end, all law and order, all authority, whether in State or Church, must know its limits. Authority must not get above itself by parading god-like pretensions. For, declares St Paul: 'How Rich are the Depths of God – How Deep his Wisdom and Knowledge!' There is no authority in this world that can know the mind of this Lord or pretend to be his counsellor.

Peter Cornwell.