

In Season, Out of Season

From today's second lesson: *I charge you solemnly, proclaim the message, press it home in season and out of season, use argument, reproof and appeal with all the patience that teaching requires.*

Those words are a very neat summary of the task of the preacher. But the phrase which has always struck a chord with me is 'In season and out of season'. It is a phrase which has clearly resonated with others. Both Canon Eric James and Canon Jeremy Davies, both distinguished preachers in their day, have entitled their books of collected sermons with those words: 'In season and out of season'. But what is it to preach in season and out of season? Needless, to say biblical scholars have had a field day interpreting that memorable phrase. I have always taken it to mean that the preacher needs to preach in easy times and difficult times, when times are in joint and out of joint. And the difficult, out of joint times call upon the preacher to be like an Old Testament prophet: preaching the hard word; telling people what they don't want to hear; often being counter cultural and swimming against the tide.

For that reason, I am going to use the excuse of preaching 'in season and out of season' to preach on something which I have been wanting to preach about for a long time but have held my tongue. The subject of this morning's brief sermon is 'Brexit'. Already, I hear deep sighs and the sound of sinking hearts. As though we haven't, especially this week, had enough of Brexit, you cry. We come to Church to get away from all of that! Yes, you're right, I sympathize – I'm in exactly the same boat. Never before have those words of Jesus 'A house divided against itself cannot stand' meant so much to me. But I don't want to talk, you'll be relieved to hear, about the rights or wrongs of Brexit, far less about politics and economics. That's another story for another time. No, my interest this morning is in what Church history, particularly the history of the Church of England, might have to say to us in our present Brexit predicament of division, strong opinions on both sides of the argument and uncertainty about the future.

You see history has a strange way of repeating itself and Brexit is not entirely a new phenomenon. The Act of Restraint of Appeals in 1533 was the first official blast of the trumpet of the English reformation. That Parliamentary statute marked the beginning of the sixteenth century's *ecclesiastical* Brexit. It made it illegal for any English person to make a legal appeal to the Pope in Rome who had hitherto been the higher Church authority in the land. It established that highest legal authority in England was the King, not the Pope, and so the Royal Supremacy over the Church was born, together with a new break away Church called not the Church *in* England but rather the Church *of* England. A national Church with the monarch at its head, independent of European Catholicism.

But that ecclesiastical Brexit was not altogether a clean break. It was an Act of State supported by some English people but opposed by many more. Some like Sir Thomas More, Chancellor of England, and John Fisher, Bishop of Rochester, were so opposed that they were prepared to die for their convictions. The country was divided between those who wished to belong to an international Catholic Church, controlled in Rome, and those who wished to break free and establish a national church in control of its own affairs. It all sounds very familiar.

The problem is that when you get these seismic changes in a nation's history there are no quick fixes. Passions run too strong. And the sixteenth century proved to be a religious and political rollercoaster as one group gained the ascendancy and then the other. Under Henry VIII, we had a soft Reformation; under Edward VI, a hard Reformation; under Mary, a cancellation of the Reformation; and under Elizabeth, a mid-way Reformation. And even in today's Church of England, the vestiges of our history are there to see in the two distinct traditions within

Anglicanism – the Catholic or High Church tradition (which sees itself as being part of something bigger than the Church of England) and the Evangelical or low Church tradition (which sees itself as an independent church with a right to self-determination).

This led to the Church of England being something of a hybrid Church, a mixture of different traditions – Catholic, Liberal and Evangelical - that somehow live together in the broad Church or under the large ecclesiastical umbrella we call Anglicanism. But because our Church life is a coalition of sometimes opposite views we have had to find a way of living together of co-existing.

We have had to learn to be polite and gracious. We have learnt that we can't push things to extremes but rather we have had to identify what compromises we can live with. Living with compromise, living with ambiguity, learning a little of what self-sacrifice might mean to show good will – all of these has been the order of the day.

In recent times two phrases have become important within Anglicanism. The first is 'seeking the common good'. Seeking the common good is about forgetting our own self-interest and looking at what will bring the greatest justice, peace and prosperity to all. And seeking the common good will always involve making compromises. The second phrase emerged from the fierce debates over the ordination of women to the priesthood and the episcopate. We recognized that within the Church the two distinct positions on that issue were not going to disappear overnight and that we needed to find a way to live in peace and love with one another. In response to that we developed the phrase 'mutual flourishing'. We respect and love others whose views may be different from ours and we want them to flourish, just as they want us to flourish.

It seems to me that history of the Church of England and its commitment to 'seek the common good' and to promote 'mutual flourishing' has much to commend itself to our fractured nation and our perplexed Parliament at this troubled time.

I end with a simple prayer:

Almighty God give wisdom to all in authority; and direct this nation in the ways of justice and peace; that we may honour one another and seek the common good. Through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.