

Seventeenth Sunday after Trinity 2019

Mattins

(Canonisation of John Henry Newman, Coburg Conference)

Nehemiah 6.1-16; John 15.12-19a

In 374AD, the city of Milan was in a state of civil disturbance that probably makes Parliament Square look like a tea-party by comparison. Its bishop, an Arian, had died and the choice of his successor had become the source of violent and noisy dispute. Yet in the middle of the cacophony, a child's voice was heard quietly to proclaim, 'Ambrose is bishop'. It's a well-known story: Ambrose was not a priest – he was the provincial governor. Indeed, he was not even baptised. And yet on the prophetic word of the child, Ambrose was unanimously elected bishop – eventually dragged from his hiding place to be baptised, ordained and consecrated.

The story of Ambrose's election was much cherished by John Henry Newman, to be canonised by Pope Francis in a matter of hours. It was a story, to his mind, that underlined the charismatic authority of the Early Church: an evocative story because it reveals that the Church is sustained not just by the ministry and sacraments of the ordained ministry, but also crucially by those gifts freely given to the faithful. Even before he started writing the *Tracts for the Times* in Oxford, Newman began a set of articles called 'the "Church of the Fathers"' in which he wrote that, far from being clerical, the early Church, in his words, "threw itself on the *people*" (*Letters and Diaries*, iv, 14,18): its authority rested as much on the quiet voice of that child in the crowd, as much as Ambrose's subsequent episcopal ministry.

We hear an echo of such spiritual focus many generations earlier in our first lesson. Nehemiah, returning to Jerusalem in the years after exile, sets about rebuilding the city walls, trusting that 'the God of heaven is the one who will give us success' (Neh. 1.20). And yet there were those who sought to dissuade him. We hear of Sanballat and Geshem who try to lure him out of the city, presumably to murder him; then they spin tales about him to suggest he's setting himself up against the emperor, seeking to drive him and the workers out by fear. Nehemiah prays "now, O God, strengthen my hands": it is a prayer answered as he perceives the deception of Shemaiah, hired by the duo to entrap him. Having narrowly avoided certain death, Nehemiah completes the repair of the wall in in fifty-two days – some inspiration for Donald Trump, perhaps.

We gather as a group of European Christians at a time of fracture in the West. The last few years have shown how easy it is for us to become distracted and anxious, lost in the media swirl and, like the people of Milan in 374, prone to fighting among ourselves rather than patiently attending to the Spirit. The Spirit who spoke through that child in Milan, the Spirit who testifies on Christ's behalf, leads us into all truth (Jn 16.13) and makes us one with Son, even as the Son is one with the Father.

The European churches too can sometimes seem feeble in response: swamped by managerialism; still divided in our own churches as much as from each other (though probably no more than in the fourth century); and lacking confidence in what we have received. But the voice is still, quietly but persistently, speaking through the chaos 'Behold, I make all things new'. I end with a quotation by Erik Varden, a young Cistercian abbot from Leicestershire, probably the finest spiritual writer of my generation, and whom Pope Francis has just appointed as Bishop of Trondheim. He writes:

A few years ago, I visited one of our order's Irish houses. Recruitment had long been lacking. The future seemed uncertain. In a conversation with an old monk, a good, clear-sighted man I valued highly (and who lay on his deathbed), I asked if it pained him to see his life's work so exposed? Without missing a beat, he answered: "I am not worried about the monastery; what grieves me is that Christ is disappearing from Ireland." This statement gave me a salutary shock. It has since helped and inspired me. How vital it is to know what really matters!

The situation my brother referred to is the same in much of Europe. In a world, a time, ever more marked by indifference and cynicism, hopelessness and division, it is our task to stand for something different: to point toward the Light that no darkness can overcome, to nurture good will, to let ourselves be reconciled, to enable a communion founded on trust, in peace, to bear witness that death has lost its sting, that life is meaningful and beautiful, of inviolable dignity. This is a great responsibility, but also a privilege- a source of transformative joy.

How vital it is to know what really matters. May we have ears to hear and hearts yearning for the Spirit's strength. Amen.