

Sermon delivered by The Rt Hon. the Lord Boateng at St Faith's Chapel, St Paul's Cathedral, on Tuesday, 20 February 2023

Shrove Tuesday for followers of Jesus Christ is a time in which we fess up to our faults and our failings and resolve to change as we go into a season of preparation honouring the ultimate sacrifice our Lord made for us on the cross and the promise of his resurrection. Lent and Easter. Before and After. An End and a New Beginning.

The Pancakes – or in our case the slap-up meal courtesy of John Norton the Stationers' late Master Benefactor – come after confession and repentance. Now Elijah isn't a pancake type of guy and doesn't sound in what we know of him to be the kind of person who would make for a jolly lunch. Prophets are seldom comfortable to be around. The whole point is after all to take us out of our comfort zone. They are by their very nature challenging. They point us towards the future.

In Elijah's case the whole world and particularly Jezebel seems out to get him and have rejected his message and his God. He has fled and sought refuge in a desert cave He is feeling pretty fed up with his lot and is despairing of his God. Prophets are however human; they share and contend with human frailty. Their own and others. That is why they speak to us over the ages and to the conditions we face in our own lives and times.

Why oh why aren't people listening !? Why am I alone in this? Where are you when I need you? What am I to do?

We've all been there in our own day-to-day lives, haven't we? The sense of rejection and other people not getting us or it is not confined to Old Testament prophets. Just because I'm paranoid doesn't mean they're not out to get me. Who here has not experienced that? Now to St Paul in our gospel reading. He specifically references Elijah. Christ after all is the fulfilment of prophecy. He represents a new beginning.

St Paul's message to that early community of believers amongst the Gentiles is that God never gives up on anyone including those who have rejected him, in this particular case the Jews of whom he, Paul, is one.

God has a use for us whoever we are, however we may feel rejected, abandoned, lesser, a spare part, in a minority, a remnant. We are loved regardless of our merits or otherwise. Not because of what we do but because We are and He is ! We are the recipients of his Grace. OK so far so Biblical. What's it got to with us? What's it got to do with the Stationers?

Well! Books and the printed word matter! The communication of ideas in that form counts for something. There is a reason why tyranny begins with the burning of books and the banning of publications. The freedoms of publishers and booksellers, the contents and the very existence of libraries go to the heart of humanity. "In the beginning was the word and the word was with God and the word was God" John affirms at the start of his Gospel. There is a reason why adherents of the Jewish, Christian and Islamic faiths are referred to as peoples of the Book for that is how God has revealed himself to us.

I walk by on the way to work in the mornings in the Gardens between Embankment and Westminster Stations a statue of William Tyndall who gave his life so that ordinary people might have access in their own

language wherever they were and whatever their station in lives to the word of God. Some of your fellow Stationers felt the same way and at great risk to themselves and their families printed, published and distributed his writings in the environs of the very place we are sat now. I must also tell you as a Vice-President of the Bible Society that today as we speak there are places in this world not in the margins but central to the world's economy where it is not always safe to have a Bible in your home and to distribute or share the Word as a follower of Jesus Christ is to risk your livelihood and even your life. Is this and the abuse of human rights that inevitably accompanies it something to which we can continue indefinitely to turn a blind eye? Doesn't it present a threat, ultimately an existential threat, to our values and way of life?

Continuing now down Whitehall still on my way to work I pass the sight of a shop once owned by Ignatius Sancho in King Charles Street. We don't yet have a statue of him but are seeking to better memorialise him in Greenwich Park near where he lived A freed slave, kidnapped from West Africa as a child, Ignatius Sancho was a composer, man of letters, chronicler of the Gordon Riots, whose works were certainly published and sold by Stationers; also a shopkeeper thanks to a legacy from the Duke of Montagu in whose family's service he had been and as such being a property owner the first recorded black elector to a Westminster Parliament. Words mattered to him for they brought him and others freedom and his words in his book "Letters of Ignatius Sancho, an African", still published today, matter to us as a chronicler of his times and the symbol of the triumph of faith, shared humanity and resolution over dire circumstance, bigotry and adversity.

We live in a time of peril in which everywhere freedom is assailed; a time of false news and false prophets in which autocrats claim that might is right, threatening their neighbours, challenging their territorial integrity and global governance and solidarity seems often inadequate to the tasks in hand We live in a time when writers feel under pressure to self-censor. Publishers feel it right or feel obliged to censor authors in their lists, even celebrated dead ones, who may be troubled or troubling, offensive or offending as if literature and art should never be any of those things.

The challenge is to listen out at such a time amidst the noise and the clamour for the still small voice of reason and discernment that calls us not to conform to the transient values of our worldly existence but to change ourselves, our ways and our institutions so as to affirm life in all its complexity and contradictions, to safeguard the eternal values of freedom of thought and expression and to seek by God's Grace the power to discern truth from falsehood and good from evil.

The Word matters! Books matter! And so, yes, Stationers and your craft matters, not just way back when with Norton, Tyndall and Sancho but in these times too! We are called all of us to listen out for that still small voice for it is by God's Grace to be found out there, just as Elijah found it! In the Here and Now! We are called in just such times as these to open ourselves up, open ourselves up to the love of God and to love our neighbours as ourselves. Empowered and Enabled by His Grace to Refresh and Renew however tired and troubled ourselves and our world. Amazing Grace!

