

Looking Backwards - Looking Forwards

Psalm 139; Job 42:1-6; 1 Peter 1:3-12

An inheritance that is imperishable [1 Peter 1:4]

Joseph Grice (his bust is on the wall in the chancel) left a bequest to the poor when he wrote his will in 1821. A record of correspondence between the Rector and Grice beginning in 1815 is available in the archives at Birmingham, together with the will enacted after his death in 1835.

1821 was the year that Napoleon Bonaparte died;
the year Fyodor Dostoyevsky was born;
and the year in which George IV was crowned.

Perhaps most importantly GF Handel and JS Bach still had 29 years of writing music in them.

Part of the condition of the bequest was that the Rector of Handsworth preach a sermon each year on St Thomas' Day reminding *the poor of their duties and promising them celestial rewards if they are contented and hardworking here below.*

The Rector was to be paid the equivalent of £1.20 for this - which according to the House of Commons Research Paper by Thomas Twigger entitled, *Inflation: the Value of the Pound 1750-1998*, would mean that I should collect the modest sum of £1,188 for this evenings efforts!

As St Thomas Day in the BCP was on the 21st December the Rector, if not the poor, would have had a good Christmas!

What a contradiction

The poor kept in their place by a well-paid cleric on the day when the Church celebrates the faith of the most notorious doubter.

But isn't contradiction what we are good at?

- * In the Psalm we know that God knows everything about us - and has done since the moment of our conception: yet we live and act as if God were deaf, blind and forgetful.

- * Job, in our Old Testament reading increasingly recognises that God is God and that our image of him is a poor shadow: that can be something we know ourselves, but as Churchill observed, *Men occasionally stumble over the truth, but most of the, pick themselves up and hurry off as if nothing had happened.*

- * We know that Peter is right when he talks about our sufferings being a necessary part of life and that they lead us to glory: knowing it to the point that we accept or don't complain about what God is doing (or not doing) most often eludes us.

When we look backwards to the Gospel story of Thomas's encounter with Jesus he isn't told off for his doubts but he is told to resolve them - **do not doubt but believe.**

It is an act of the mind and the will because faith is the only thing that can change doubt into belief.

So too, with the hypocrisies that present themselves politely as contradictions - these are a motivation to ensure that we become all that God can make us.

- * We look back at Joseph Grice and find it easy to point out the hypocrisy of a gift to the poor being dependent on the well-rewarded wafflings of a priest - but where are the people today that even consider the poor in their life-time or in their wills?
- * We look around now at the hypocrisy of others and find in that a defence or justification for our own hypocrisy - but where is the honesty of Job who stands before God and says that he hasn't got it right and doesn't blame God?
- * We look forward and realise that what we will become - as individuals and as a community of faith - is as much a matter of choice as Thomas resolving his doubts.

The world has changed since 1821

- yet it is the same.

The questions and doubts people have are phrased differently

- yet they are the same.

The needs of people are more sophisticated

- yet food and shelter and hope remain as the basic needs.

If we want things to change - concerning doubts; concerning hypocrisy; or concerning how we treat the poor - that change begins with us!