

Sermon, Sexagesima 2004. The Parable of the Sower...

I've spent much of the week trying to prepare something to say about today's gospel, the parable of the sower. Now it just so happens also this week that the General Synod met in Westminster. This gives me the opportunity to clear up one routine misconception at the start. The Synod is always referred to by the BBC as "The Church's Parliament." It is no such thing. While the Church of England remains the Established Church, there is *one* Parliament and it is that which, under Her Majesty the Queen, sits in the Palace of Westminster. Of course it is killing the pig of the modernisers in the Synod – that's most of them actually – that they're not the Church's Parliament, because the real Parliament's authority over the Church means that the synodical iconoclasts cannot ban the *King James Bible* and the *Book of Common Prayer* which they have longed to do for the last forty years.

So let me begin this morning with the good news. It is decreed by the Law of England that the Prayer Book remains the official service book of the Church of England. And note this, the Law says precisely that the Prayer Book is to be regarded as the standard in all matters of faith and doctrine. So be encouraged: if any members of the dumbed-down, aisle-dancing fraternity accuse you of being reactionary and past your sell-by date because you use the real Bible and the real Prayer Book, remind them that you represent the lawful tradition and that they are allowed to use their inferior alternative books only by way of a concession. They are free to exercise their moronic preferences as a privilege granted to them by the real Church.

But back to the parable of the sower. It struck me that, when it comes to such phrases as "Some fell by the wayside... some fell on stony ground... some fell among thorns." Our Lord might well have been prophesying the coming of the modern church and its talkative, self-regarding synod which spends its time undermining the faith delivered to the saints.

The biggest ecclesiastical event in the Diocese of London this year was the so-called Sacred Synod held last month in All Souls' Langham Place. All the clergy were commanded to attend. All Souls used to be a prominent Evangelical church. I am not of that Low Church persuasion, but I could appreciate the brilliant biblical preaching of such as John Stott who taught the gospel there for fifty years; and I admired and enjoyed the example All Souls set to the nation when *The Daily Service* used to be relayed from there at 10.45 every morning on the BBC – before that Corporation turned to putting out religious broadcasting that is nothing but a vicious satire on the Christian Faith. I'm glad to say that John Stott is still alive, but, if he were dead, he would surely be turning in his grave if he could see the clowns who have now ascended his pulpit.

As I said, this most important gathering was called a Sacred Synod. It was also called *Back to the Future*. Why can't they see the disjunction between calling a synod sacred and then naming it after a science-fiction fantasy film? I suppose the fact that this film was released in 1985 reveals the depth of the organisers' historical sense. When I arrived with, to nerve me against catastrophe, our Parish Clerk, Rupert, and Stephen Keeble, Vicar of Harrow Headstone, a dance-band leader was waving his arms about and warming up the massive congregations with frequent ejaculations of a music-hall

or pantomime sort. The performance on offer was so bogus it would have made Max Bygraves look sincere.

These excitable modernisers are always telling traditionalists that we're out of date. Yet their whole show was like a 1950s *Sunday Night at the London Palladium* preserved in aspic. There is nothing quite so arch as an out-of-date arch-trendy. David Martin once said, "The modern church follows popular fashion, but always, like the Prince Consort, one dutiful pace behind." I cannot adequately describe the appearance and demeanour of this dance-bandleader whose name was something like "tread-in-it" – and when you heard the music you understood how apt this name was. His expression: well, you must imagine the expression on the face of the undertaker Mr Sowerberry from *Oliver Twist* upon having learnt that he'd just won the National Lottery.

There was a sprinkling of bishops present, like robins among sparrows. But they said nothing throughout. There were innumerable sentimental choruses – repetitions umpteen times of lines that weren't worth singing once. There were politically-correct prayers. They gave thanks for diversity in this ambience in which everything was pathetically third-rate and the same. There was even something like a Psalm. But pardon me if I weep: I mean how could anyone replace the words *Like as the hart desireth the water brooks* with *As the deer pants for the water?* We prayed for *all whose lives have hallowed this City*. And they saw no irony in the fact that this prayer was being said by those now desecrating it.

But wait there dawns a yet more glorious day. Or I thought I saw a glimmer of it on the horizon. The order of service announced that we were going to have the wonderful hymn *Christ is made the sure foundation* to the sublime tune by Henry Purcell. It started up – only accompanied by a disco beat. The philistines were upon us and I would have given anything at that moment for the jawbone of an ass. Finally we had a sort of doxology full of more repetitions. A very odd tune here. It reminded me of something, but I couldn't quite make out what it was. I turned to Stephen Keeble and he whispered, "Danny Kaye: 'With a quack, with a quack and a whistle and a quack and a very unhappy frown'."

There is no let up in the destructive programme of the General Synod. This week in Westminster they urged, for the thousandth time, and I quote, "...that the church should experiment with new styles of worship" to stem the wholesale desertion of the pews. How can they so easily forget that every time they have introduced new services these last forty years, the congregations have plummeted? They proposed "café churches", "cell churches" and "seeker services". They demanded "coffee and croissants, and cathedral raves led by rapping disc-jockeys." Again the parable of the sower comes to mind: *Some fell on stony ground and these have no root.*

But my dear people, turn your minds to the way the parable of the sower ends and lift up your hearts. *And other seed fell on good ground and sprang up and bare fruit an hundredfold.* You aspire to be the good ground. And the fertile seed which falls upon us all is the truth of the gospel mediated to us in words and music hallowed by time and use – whose expression is the very best created by human beings under the inspiration of God throughout the ages. There is no such thing as noble truth expressed in ignoble language. The medium is the message and, if the medium you

prefer is the shabby, sleazy pop culture and the likes of *Back to the Future*, then the message proclaimed will be correspondingly debased.

Take a pride and a joy and a comfort in what our traditional faith provides for us. Enjoy and be stimulated to heartfelt response by the spiritual conversation which we maintain at St Michael's continually. Pray all the great prayers not only with your lips but from the heart. Be kindly affectioned to one another – in love preferring one another. Know that in the words and music and fellowship we have here we have the pearl of great price in a treasure house of rare devotion. Beware imitations. Know also that we are not alone. There are, in congregations here and there throughout the land, more than 7000 who have not bowed the knee to Baal. And the gates of hell shall not prevail.

Draw near and receive the body and blood of the Lord and be sustained by Him whose love shall enclose you all the days of your life and finally bring you to his everlasting kingdom. Where shall we go, O Lord, for thou hast the words of eternal life? So worship the Lord in the beauty of holiness. Let us all stand in awe of Him.

*And other seed fell on good ground and sprang up and bare fruit an hundredfold.
Amen.*