

Fluttering in the Dovecote

'Wigs and Mitres' Sermon preached in the Chapel of Lincoln's Inn on Sunday 10th October 2021.

Amos 6. 6-15. Mark 10. 17-31

Here's a rather snide and not wholly kind question, posed by a cynical parent to a daughter embarking upon a legal career: 'Tell me what truly motivates your desire to do this: is it a passion for justice, or a passion for money?' And the perfect answer – succinct, accurate and mildly reproofing – 'Both'.

It was an exchange that came back to my mind when I considered the lessons provided by the Church's Lectionary for this Sunday and this occasion, passion for both being clearly in evidence in the scriptures we have heard read for us. The passion of the prophet Amos for justice is clear in his injunction to 'hate the evil, and love the good and [to] establish judgement in the gate', especially in respect of the 'spoiled' in need of being 'strengthened against the strong', and his championing of the poor on whom intolerable burdens are laid. And in the Gospel story the rich man who was challenged by Jesus to give away all that he owned – his 'great possessions' – was unable to rise to the challenge, such (it seems) was his own passion for the wealth he held.

Justice for the weak against the strong and the poor against the rich, and wealth and all that it represents of opportunity, possibility, security and so much more (including much that is in and of itself positive and desirable to make for a better world): surely a passion for both is by no means unreasonable?

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As inspiration for us this morning, as we consider these competing – or should that be complementary? – claims, we are given the columbarium. Obviously here and in this place the columbarium we have blessed and dedicated is a space for remembrance, of honour and of rest. It is a great privilege to be a small part of the story of its installation in this chapel. But I wonder if we may not think a bit beyond *this* columbarium and engage – rather – with what the word and the idea it embodies may suggest more generally for our world, in which justice and wealth are powerful concepts and realities?

Before it came to signify a place for the deposit of remains – a place of remembrance and rest – a columbarium was, of course, (Latinists will be here before me) a place for doves. A house for birds who bill and coo, symbols biblically of peace and reconciliation and romantically of love and togetherness. A promising and delightful model and inspiration, we may think, for human society and community.

But – and here's the thing: a significant But – dovecotes are not, in reality, like this at all. The Director of Music in a former of parish of mine was a keeper of doves. He had a dovecote in his garden full of beautiful, fluttery creatures, their tuneful voices a delight in the evening and their presence a blessing, always on hand as a reference point for illustrating and enlarging upon dove-related scriptures and themes, as they arose.

The thing was, however, that this dovecote was little less than a war zone, a place of fierce contest and strict demarcation. The individual roosts were closely and carefully separated from one another by stout chicken wire so as to prevent the lovely creatures from falling on one another with claws

and beaks unsheathed and doing irreparable damage. As a demonstration of harmonious community the dovecote was (to put it mildly) a bit of a let down.

Or perhaps not.

What, I wonder, might the dovecote – in its true character, rather than its romanticised reputation – suggest for human community and how it may be regulated or influenced by passion for justice or passion for wealth (and what that may represent)?

‘Community’, I suggest, is a word that among us may be currently undergoing something of a change – even a reversal – in its significance. Once the word straightforwardly referred to a collection of individuals who share a context – maybe fortuitously, such as the inhabitants of a town or village, or more intentionally, as in a religious community sharing their life in a particular convent or monastery. The emphasis was on the commonality of context, of place, rather than anything else. Indeed, the challenge in this reading of the word is to make harmonious and integrated existence of potentially competing and conflicted interests all gathered in one space. The doves in the dovecote, in fact.

By contrast, we may notice that increasingly frequently in contemporary discourse the word ‘community’ is preceded by an adjective to distinguish or emphasise some common characteristic of the collective referred to: the LGBTQ community, the fox-hunting community, the legal community, or whatever it may be. The emphasis is not so much on difference as on similarity, with the unspoken implication (maybe) that harmony will be easier (or disharmony more shocking) than among more disparate collections of individuals.

In my role presiding over a Theological College – what we sometimes grandly refer to as a ‘Community of Formation’ – I notice this confusion of meaning, and accompanying confusion of expectation, fairly frequently. Romantically, naively, or maybe just hopefully, students (and sometimes colleagues) gather – especially just now, at the start of the year – eager to enter into what they think of (and sometimes call, albeit misleadingly) a ‘religious community’, anticipating it to be made up of people *like* them, whom they will then find it easy to *like*.

And so often they are disappointed! The dovecote that is my Theological College is not physically equipped with wire fences and divided into defended spaces, but it sometimes feels as though it ought to be, as can so many closed or semi-closed societies, maybe even including Inns of Court. The model, in fact, for human community being much more often in the real world the real bird-house than the gentle columbarium of myth.

For us who train clergy – for all that it is shocking – this is, I think, appropriate, as it may be for the training of lawyers also. For the world – the real world we are to serve – is a community in the *old* sense, the proper sense, of difference, competition and (often) conflict; all this contained in a conscribed and shared single setting. Our current focus on and anxiety about the finitude and fragility of our planet and the competitive ways in which we inhabit it is – surely – bringing this home to us powerfully.

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So what passion – or passion for what mechanisms – shall we turn to in order to bring order and regulation to the potential chaos and destructiveness of the world of the dovecote?

The rich man of the Gospel, it seems, set great store by his wealth, a personal resource providing him (no doubt) with reassurance and security. In and of itself (like wealth always) morally neutral, it

represented power and potential to shape and influence the chaos of the world, enabling the young man to survive and to flourish, and perhaps to offer greater order and certainty to others around him. Yet what Jesus seemed to notice and to challenge was dependence on this resource that amounted to a passion that in the end was likely to be divisive and destructive.

Amos, by contrast, saw that hope and promise lie not so much in the elimination, suppression or even control of difference – by *force majeure*, whether of money or whatever power it represents – as in a revolutionary attitude to the difference itself and those who embody it: difference in community as gift and variety of competing interests contained and enabled in a context of mutual responsibility and pooled agency.

My neighbour – so different from me: weak when I am strong, poor when I am rich, overlooked when I have standing – is nevertheless one whose interests belong *with* mine in the context of our shared setting and shared belonging.

This revolutionary way of relating in the context of contest and competition is, I think, what Jesus called loving your enemy. Amen.