

6.30pm – Evensong – 31st October 2010
4 before Advent – 1st EP of All Saints – Year C

Sirach 44: 1-15
Revelation 19: 6-10

Our first reading tonight, from Sirach, or Ecclesiasticus, brought to my mind strong images of community - a hymn in honour of notable ancestors. Granted, only men were mentioned, and they weren't "common men", but at least they were diverse in their occupations. The word was that all of them, from the rulers of kingdoms who had made a name with their valour, down to those whose names have been forgotten, had been apportioned "great glory" by the Lord. And even those whose names and lives, and children's names and lives, had been forgotten, are still remembered. Because their righteous deeds and their names live on "generation after generation". And I take this to be a celebration of community and continuity. Also I take some pleasure in noting that in the list of famous men, with its implicit hierarchy, the rich men were last. Even composers of music and poets came before them. Rulers led the list, followed by intelligent counsellors to the rulers, prophets, and then wise instructors of the people, and only then come the rich, "living peacefully in their homes". Maybe we should, perhaps, be concerned that the rich in our own day, have sometimes moved up too high on our current list of famous and powerful. Would that they would stay more peacefully in their homes.

It's significant that this eulogy comes after a long hymn, the second half of chapter 42 through to the end of chapter 43, that praises the Natural World. The sun, moon, stars, rainbows, and other marvels. And it comes before a very long series of praises to some of the great names from Israel's history, beginning with Enoch, Noah, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and Moses. And then ranging through the great kings and prophets, with brief condemnations of a couple of bad kings along the way. Thus, the hymn to the unnamed famous men of Ecclesiasticus 44 fits into an even grander sequence of hymns, revealing continuities and an evolving community. Even the really big-names, like Moses, are rooted in this more ordinary community of honoured ancestors, a community that goes way back in time and geography, and will go forward in both. And this ordinary human community is in turn rooted in the natural, material world and universe of Sirach's own time. Our praise of famous men is in this way a part of a poetic expansion of the creation stories of Genesis. The larger set of hymns implies, or prefigures, an holistic view of creation and our place in it, a view that sees everything as connected. Or perhaps as nested together. Each manifestation of reality sited within the next, from the cosmic right down to the human. Linked, or as texts on the web, hyperlinked - everything connected. I like to think of this section of Sirach as a foreshadowing of systems theory and the study of inter-connect-edness in all realms of nature, because connectedness is essential. But community, under the great stress of impersonal economic and political forces, is ever harder to find, create and sustain.

We are standing on the shoulders of giants, even if frequently unknown ones. And even those who appear to be the giants of ages past, are standing on the shoulders of others. And all stand on the shifting structures of natural systems. Unfortunately, the "human pyramid" of standers-on-shoulders, and our natural life-support systems are all in danger of disconnecting on a grand scale. Our resources for building up good connections are often small in comparison to the resources devoted to destruction. There is, however, a large place where the Bible and humanism, anthropology and ecology, and dissidence of many kinds, all meet. I see that place as a kind of 'staging area' for movements of resistance and justice, raising hopes for community and for peace. Whatever commitments move people to that staging area are to be applauded and nurtured. Because finding and keeping their connectedness and developing it further, will never be easy. Doctrines that would restrict access to the staging area will always abound, be they religious or secular, in their assertions of various different orthodoxies. Splits and diverging movements will always arise. The way is definitely difficult, and narrow.

This day, 31st October, is called Reformation Day in the German town of Wittenberg. And it celebrates the beginning of the Reformation of the Western Church that began with Martin Luther nailing some theses to a door in Wittenberg, in 1517. But Luther was only one of many reformers, including Huldrych Zwingli, John Calvin, William Tyndale and Thomas Cranmer, amongst very many others. And if you wish to find out more, come back tomorrow night for the next part of our Autumn teaching course on the 'History of Christianity', when we will be watching the episode on Reformation.

It is up to us, their descendants, to stand by the same covenants as they did. Then we, the offspring of all these saints, will continue for ever, and their glory will never be blotted out. And the assembly, that is us and many like us, can declare their wisdom, and the congregation proclaims their praise, of all the Saints who went before us. Amen.