

EASTER 5 2022: ST GEORGE'S WINDSOR

Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. Words from today's second lesson. **Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another.** I shall return to those words later.

This year, 2022, marks the 100th anniversary of the publication, in 1922, of T. S. Eliot's major poem: **The Waste Land**. This work, in five parts, is not for the fainthearted. Someone has described it as being like a jigsaw with many of the pieces missing. It is hard to make sense of it as a whole. Nevertheless, if you read it carefully with ears open to its many allusions, it can make an impression on you.

Because my struggles with it have never come to much, I hesitate to speak about it. Perhaps, however, you will bear with me while I select just two things to say about this piece of writing that is now acclaimed as a major landmark in our literary history.

The first thing I want to say is that the title **The Waste Land** sets the scene for the reader. Written not very long after the First World War, the poem contains, here and there throughout its many lines, evocative reminders of the fact that, in 1922, the world looked very bleak; morally anarchic, spiritually arid, and infected by an air of futility. People experienced what has been called "the death of dreams".

The second thing I want to say about **The Waste Land** is that it is peppered with references to bits and pieces of our literary and religious tradition; echoes from the past. If people were experiencing "the death of dreams", perhaps their 'mourning' might make them sensitive to what you could call 'fragments' of ancient wisdom; give them something to hold on to in confused times; something perhaps that will contribute to the making of a better future.

Almost at the end of the fifth part of **The Waste Land**, you find the line: "These fragments have I shored against my ruins." When I first read those words, they hit home hard. For many people in the nineteen twenties, all great schemes of belief and ideology seemed to have been shattered. But maybe all was not lost. "These fragments I have shored against my ruins."

If I am anywhere near the truth of the matter in what I have to say about **The Waste Land**, I think I can claim that, one hundred years later, it has a contemporary ring to it. The images that come to us each day from Ukraine tell the tale of desolation. Yet, we are not haunted only by the physical destruction that we see. Those images seem to speak loudly to us of "the death of dreams". We are disillusioned. We look out onto a world that is very bleak, morally anarchic, spiritually arid, and infected by an air of futility.

Of course, it is our tendency to project much of this onto an ‘enemy’. That is the way it has always been. However, in our heart of hearts, I suspect we shiver at the thought that the seeds of disintegration, decline and desolation, are all around us, sown day by day by a morally careless and spiritually ignorant society.

At the same time, the likes of us cannot lose heart. Amidst the rubble, so we believe, there are things to be remembered and treasured so that we might say: “These fragments I have shored against my ruins.”

One of the ‘fragments’ that we can still rescue as treasure from what I have just called ‘the rubble’, the wasteland, is the story of Jesus Christ. For now, and for most people, it will be dug up quite separately from any talk about God, let alone the Trinity. It will almost surely be detached from any picture of the Church as most people think of it. Maybe, the miraculous will not find a place in this narrative. But the story of the man of sorrow and of love can capture the imagination, remind us of all we know that we are somehow ‘called’ to be, and inspire us to suffer in the service of a better future.

Twenty years after the publication of **The Waste Land**, in 1942, T. S. Eliot, in his poem **Little Gidding**, composed words that seem especially appropriate. He wrote: “With the drawing of this Love and the voice of this Calling / We shall not cease from exploration”.

The excavation of the ‘fragment’ can be the beginning of further exploration and of the development of a richer faith.

Eliot himself, five years after the publication of **The Waste Land**, was baptised, and became a member of the Church of England. The administration of the sacrament, the erstwhile Unitarian Eliot’s being baptised in the name of the Trinity, took place on 29th June 1927. One day later, he was confirmed by the Bishop of Oxford in the bishop’s private chapel.

Eliot’s spiritual journey had taken him through the wasteland. To what extent he shared the desolation that he describes, I do not know. But I am certain that he understood it. If we are to take our evangelism seriously, I am sure that we must understand our contemporary desolation too. At a time when, for reasons both good and bad, great schemes of belief and ideology ring hollow, and when “the death of dreams” seems to be the order of the day, our evangelism must be modest, and must be sensitive. It is bound to begin with fragments; little shards of wisdom that will provoke further exploration. One such fragment will be the story of a man of sorrow and of love; a story that can capture the imagination, remind us of all we know that we are somehow ‘called’ to be, and inspire us to suffer in the service of a better future.

Jesus said: **Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another.** Such words, even in the midst of a wasteland, have an authority we cannot deny. To hear them through all the clamour, invites further exploration, and gives hope for a better future.

“These fragments I have shored against my ruins”.