

Sermon
All Saints, Blackheath
Sunday 6th November 2011

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One of my pet hates in life - we all have them after all - is pub quizzes. I can't bear going for a pleasant relaxing pit and finding my ears bashed by an assortment of unlikely questions, 10 second bursts of the cheesiest pieces of classical music and teams of people fighting over picture identification rounds.

Oh well.

All that said I am going to try a pub quiz type question on you this morning: which are the top selling books of the twentieth century.

Well number one is east: the Bible. Number two a predictable Thoughts of Chairman Mao, number four though is what I want to think about this morning. First published in 1908 as a series of six booklets. It's author was the hero of the The Siege of Mafeking in the second Boer War.

Any ideas.

Well the author was, of course, Robert Baden Powell. The book his Scouting for Boys.

In 1908 in a series of six pamphlets Robert Baden Powell, the hero of the siege of Mafeking, published his Scouting for Boys. It was to become the fourth best selling publication of the twentieth century.

Now I don't know if our Rosa, Millie, Henry and Sophie will become guides or scouts one day. I wonder if we do have any brownies, rainbows, badgers, scouts or guides in church this morning?

Perhaps they could help us out with the scout motto.....

This is what Baden Powell has to say the motto means in his book:

"The Scout Motto is: BE PREPARED which means you are always in a state of readiness in mind and body to do your DUTY.

Be Prepared in Mind by having disciplined yourself to be obedient to every order, and also by having thought out beforehand any accident or situation that might occur, so that you know the right thing to do at the right moment, and are willing to do it.

Be Prepared in Body by making yourself strong and active and able to do the right thing at the right moment, and do it."

Be prepared is, of course, exactly what this morning's gospel is talking about. The wise virgins who were prepared and the foolish ones who were not.

It's a wonderful reading and theme for a morning on which we are going to baptise four children. Because what we are doing when we baptise these children is enabling them to be prepared for life.

Baptism prepares us for life because it provides us with the resources we need for life itself.

Those resources can be summed up in three words:

Story

Community

Prayer

When we baptise children they enter into the story of the bible, the story of God's doings with humanity. We give to these children the stories that will allow them to make sense of the world. We give them the stories that will be a resource for them whatever happens in their lives. When they hit rock bottom and can see nothing but despair and darkness they will be able to pray the words of Psalm 130 'Out of the depths I have cried to you, O Lord'. When they feel lost and don't know what choices to make they will be able to pray with psalm 23 "the Lord is my Shepherd".

Baptism also gives them the story of our society built as it is on the foundations of Christianity. They will be able to understand so much poetry, literature, theatre, music and art that is incomprehensible without knowing Christian history and culture.

When we baptise children we give them community: a place to belong to and where they will if they keep coming to church as they grow up know the rituals and practices. They will always be able to go into an Anglican church and recognise it as home. They will know where to turn to celebrate the great moments of their lives: their weddings, and the baptism of their own children. Where to go to hear the great music that is so much a part of what we do here at All Saints.

When we baptise children we teach them to be people of prayer. By being part of this community, by learning the words of Christian prayers we give them the resources so that they do not need to search for a vocabulary to express the deepest and most wonderful moments of their lives. Who when they fall in love can not want to utter those amazing words: With my body I thee worship.

Or when they are feeling confused pray as we do at the beginning of the Prayer Book Mass: Almighty God: to whom all hearts are open, all desires known.

Story, Community and Prayer are the gifts we offer these children.

I am so pleased that their parents have brought Rosa, Millie, Henry and Sophie to baptism. So often I hear people say that they are not bringing their children up as Christians because they want them to make their own choice when they re older. This is quite frankly, nonsense. No one gets a taste for good food by never eating, or for decent wine by drinking only water.

There is no such thing as neutral, secular ground. The secular is antithetical to the religious.

As most of you know I spend most of my working life in school with teenagers. Over and over again, I see the effect of children whop do not have the gifts of Story, Community and Prayer. Children who must invent their own morality and reinvent the lessons that Christians have learnt over the centuries. Children whose lives are boundary-less and who for whom teenage rebellion must be of the most extreme and gross kind.

I sometimes describe Christianity as a clever way of living a happy life. This is something that Baden Powell knew so well.

Towards the end of his life he wrote a letter to the guide and scout movement; a sort of last will and testament to them. I hope you will forgive the exclusive and old fashioned , but rather lovely, I think, language. He writes:

"...I have had a most happy life and I want each one of you to have a happy life too. I believe that God put us in this jolly world to be happy and enjoy life. Happiness does not come from being rich, nor merely being successful in your career, nor by self-indulgence. One step towards happiness is to make yourself healthy and strong while you are a boy, so that you can be useful and so you can enjoy life when you are a man. Nature study will show you how full of beautiful and wonderful things God has made the world for you to enjoy. Be contented with what you have got and make the best of it. Look on the bright side of things instead of the gloomy one. But the real way to get happiness is by giving out happiness to other people. Try and leave this world a little better than you found it and when your turn comes to die, you can die happy in feeling that at any rate you have not wasted your time but have done your best. 'Be Prepared' in this way, to live happy and to die happy — stick to your Scout Promise always — even after you have ceased to be a boy — and God help you to do it."

This passage is a brilliant summary of today's three readings.

As we've noticed already that Gospel with its message to be prepared.

The first reading from the book of Wisdom with its desire that wisdom meet the believer in every thought; the kind of deep wisdom that is displayed, I believe, in Baden Powell, and finally the acknowledgement by all of us that as St Paul makes clear in that second reading from his first letter to the Thessalonians that baptism prepares us not just for life but for eternity.

And that is our prayer today for Rosa, Millie, Henry and Sophie.