

Rose-tinted spectacles

II Samuel 5:1-5,9-10; Mark 6:1-13

The quotation “History is written by the victors” is attributed to Winston Churchill, and that is what we have in our Old Testament lesson today. David is now King over the kingdoms of Judah and Israel. It had not been a pretty period. Brutal civil war, people changing sides, families divided and destroyed, until at last David emerges as the victor. At the beginning of the story David had been merely an eighth son, a genuine nobody to whom power was given. Here in our reading, King over all he surveyed, he is in his newly united kingdom and creates a new capital, the old hilltop town of Jerusalem. It was said to be the site where Abraham had prepared to offer his son Isaac in sacrifice. In years to come it would be the place where the Temple was built, and where, years after that, the prophet Mohammed was said to have ascended to heaven.

But history is written by the victors. And that applies as much to the Bible as it does to secular history. Here’s a story that appeals to those who believe in a theology of success, that whosoever God is with, will have success and power and even wealth. This echoes the prosperity gospel beloved of TV preachers. On the face of it this story suggests that might be true, yet the story behind the story is a different beast altogether and closer to the far more uncertain and darker reality of our present world.

To read these few verses is to be left with the feeling that everything had been plain-sailing; that God had been right there with David, and that everything that had happened had happened the way God had intended. No flaws, no hiccoughs, no reversals, just one long, steady progression to David becoming King in his new capital city of Jerusalem, the City of David. This is history of the rose-tinted spectacle variety. This is history that was written many years after the event, probably at a time when the fortunes of Israel were low, and the writers needed to look back to

a time when things were perfect, things were wonderful, things were in a positive light, things were seen through rose-tinted spectacles.

One writer suggests that, “If God is with David, this seems to have been evident only in hindsight.” This is an interesting comment as most of the story of David is edited together from materials first written down while the Israelites were in Exile and thus at a time when rose-tinted spectacles were much in vogue. The reality seems to have been that David’s rise to power was in a world as confusing and violent as any of the time, including our own.

David took advantage of that and fought for the power he eventually gained. It is a lesson about building up a theology of success based on stories written long after the events and in circumstances that idolised the past. David’s smooth transition is simply a looking back on what was believed to be a golden era that never truly existed and to a time when God’s hand in human affairs was as unclear and mysterious as it is today.

The danger is always to write over the pain and hurt of the past with a theology that comes more from the ambitions of the victors than from the love of God. The story of the Bible however is rather a story seeking God in the reality of the world and attempting to bear witness to a God who works in the world through a different set of principles and values.¹

Jesus, in His own time, also had to contend with those who viewed the past through rose-tinted spectacles. In His ministry around the Sea of Galilee, He returned to His home-town of Nazareth. Perhaps people had heard of the things that He had been doing in other places; perhaps it was simply His turn as a Jewish man to teach in the synagogue on the Sabbath. But when He spoke, people could not believe what they were hearing, or did not want to believe it.

¹ Spill the Beans Volume 4 p43

The people of Nazareth had constructed a past that suited their present. Through their rose-tinted spectacles they viewed Jesus as an upstart. Wasn't He only the local joiner's son? How could He suddenly now speak with authority and wisdom in a way that unsettled their notion of Who He was and what He was capable of? In Scotland we have the phrase, "*I kent his faither*", and that is what we have here. Jesus burst out of the rose-tinted past into which He had been put by His fellow towns-people, and this edgy, challenging, commanding individual no longer fitted their image of what they thought right and proper. They had a view of the past that suited them, and they were not prepared to accept this new present that Jesus proclaimed to them. Familiarity had bred contempt. Here was 'little Jesus', Who had grown up around the corner with Mary (and note the rest of the family, Jesus was not an only child). Here was 'Jesus the carpenter' who had made their tables and benches, now in the role of a wise prophet of God. It didn't fit the view through their rose-tinted spectacles, it struck a nerve. The townspeople of Nazareth expected to see the Jesus they had always known, the One Who seems no different from them. So when He starts to preach with wisdom and perform deeds of power, they could not see beyond their rose-tinted spectacles. They would not listen, nor would they believe.

The writers of the history of Israel, and its great King David had them: rose-tinted spectacles, glossing over awkward bits of history; airbrushing out parts of a story that did not look good, or shiny, or positive. The people of Nazareth had them: rose-tinted spectacles, unable to see anything new or different because it would upset their status quo, or even challenge their long-held prejudices and assumptions.

And what about us? When have we, or do we, put on those rose-tinted spectacles? When do we choose not to see things that are inconvenient in our own lives, or the lives of others? What do we gloss over or edit out or sweep under the carpet? When do we compare the present to the past unfavourably, because the realities of today do not suit our perceptions or our prejudices? When do we hanker after a past that, if we were to look a little more closely, would very rarely be everything that we assumed it would be?

I call it the 'Downton syndrome'. We all look to the past and assume we'll be the Dowager Countess, or Lord Grantham, or certainly 'upstairs', whereas in all likelihood we'd have been toiling away downstairs in the kitchens or the stables.

I love history, but wearing rose-tinted spectacles not only distorts the past but also distracts the present and limits the future. It may be uncomfortable; it will certainly be challenging; but looking at things the way they are, and the imagining what they might be, surely that is the way of faith? We have little business in re-writing history to suit our own ends. But we are in the business, like all people of faith, of re-imagining the present, and working towards creating the future.

The British have a genius for nostalgia. We hanker back to golden ages that did not quite exist the way we fondly imagine. We should not ignore the past, but nor should we be imprisoned in it or by it. To live in the present and to face the future confidently and faithfully is what is called for. In our personal lives; in our church life; in our national life.

Are there areas in your life where you are viewing things through rose-tinted spectacles because you do not want to see what you really know is there; because if you did see it you would have to deal with it? Are there areas in our nation's life where we are avoiding some home-truths about our economic prospects, or our attitudes to immigration, or our claim to be an open and welcoming society whereas in some ways we are anything but? Are there areas in the Church's life, locally or nationally, where our refusal to address the need for thoughtful change, or even courageous change, and our unwillingness to let go attitudes to gender, sexuality, the role of children, the way we function as a Church is now holding us back from being the people of God that God wants us to be? It is a sobering thought to reflect that in some areas the world we are called to serve has moved on more positively than we have as a Church, and we remain stuck in the rut of fear, or uncertainty, or stubbornness because we've grown too comfortable with the way things are, rather than the way they should be. A bit like the people of Nazareth who couldn't see Jesus for Who He was, let alone listen to what He had to say.

The good news is, it does not have to remain that way. The good news is the bright light of Jesus shines through the rose-tinted spectacles, and lets us see His world, and our world, the way it really is. The good news is that the bright light of Jesus illuminates the past and the present, so that we see them honestly, and then shines into the future, so that we may venture into it hopefully.

It's time to take those spectacles off. It's time to see the world is not rose-hued, but multicoloured and full of vibrancy and texture and contrast. It's time to look with the eyes of Jesus, and attempt the things that He would be attempting to make this world the fairer, gentler, more open and honest and welcoming place it needs to be.

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.

Amen