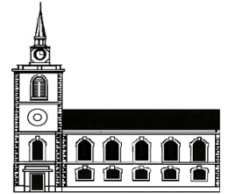


St James's Church Piccadilly London

18 August 2013 / Trinity 12

The Revd Hugh Valentine

Luke 12.49-56



Vagabonds for God

Few of the many events and happenings connected with this church both past and present give me as much delight and encouragement and hope as a group which celebrates 15 years (or so) this year, and which meets later today.

The group is called simply Vagabonds. I say '15 years or so' because no one is quite sure. But it is 15 years give or take a year – and why would we expect much temporal precision from a group of exploring vagabonds busy with things eternal?

The group takes its name from a poem by William Blake. Blake was born in 1757 not far from this spot. Although he came from dissenter stock he was baptised in this church. Perhaps his father, as a local businessman when the Church of England was a powerful and dominating body, thought it prudent to bring his son for baptism.

In addition to being known as a poet, William Blake was also a painter and printmaker. He is regarded by many as a mystic. In his day some thought him mad. He revered the Bible but was hostile to the Church of England and to all forms of organised religion. It is said that he never again entered a church.

The poem in question is The Little Vagabond:

*Dear Mother, dear Mother, the Church is cold,
But the Ale-house is healthy & pleasant & warm;
Besides I can tell where I am use'd well,
Such usage in heaven will never do well.*

*But if at the Church they would give us some Ale.
And a pleasant fire, our souls to regale;
We'd sing and we'd pray, all the live-long day;
Nor ever once wish from the Church to stray,*

*Then the Parson might preach & drink & sing,
And we'd be as happy as birds in the spring:
And modest Dame Lurch, who is always at Church,
Would not have bandy children nor fasting nor birch.*

*And God like a father rejoicing to see,
His children as pleasant and happy as he:
Would have no more quarrel with the Devil or the Barrel
But kiss him & give him both drink and apparel.*

Blake took the imagination seriously. He said it was 'the Body of God'. He was greatly troubled by industrialisation and its effect upon human wellbeing. He was horrified by war. His poetry displays an attitude of rebellion against the abuse of class power and he was opposed to slavery. Of monarchy he said a country with a king "makes all men slaves". Some read into his work a flavour of anarchism. There is no doubt that he was Christian. He lived by faith and rejected religion.

All that will gain many a sympathetic nod from those of us gathered here 255 years after his baptism. Have things changed much? In many way, no. We still subjects of a monarch; we still have a Church of England 'by law established'; we still have hierarchies - formal and informal; and he might note that for all our available 'leisure' time and technological gadgetry our imaginations are strangely withered and constrained, even distorted.

The St James's Vagabonds came into being for reasons William Blake would have understood. The original impetus was a concern for new arrivals here who bore the wounds and the trauma of Christian fundamentalism. They had arrived as refugees. They still do. The idea of Vagabonds gradually evolved as an attempt to provide healing for former fundamentalists. This story is fascinatingly told by Dick Whittington, one of the original co-founders of Vagabonds, in a memoir recently published on our website.

The group has drawn more than just a name from Mr Blake. It embodies his independence of spirit and suspicion of holy hierarchies: it has always been entirely lay-led. Whilst organised it is not over-organised – sometimes there lurks a

hint of holy disorder. It has always met in the ale-house and not the steeple-house. The emphasis is on exploration not instruction. And if you were to look at the topics of the Vagabonds' meetings in recent times you would see the imagination writ-large. Here are a few: Usury, Seeking the Divine through the Language of Eros; Does the Church Enable or Infantilise?, Feminist Theology, Quantum Theology, Process Theology, Eschatology, How do you love the ones you hate?, Can you, should you, forgive after abuse?, God, life, love and music, Without Buddha I could not be a Christian, Intersex (that refers to the rare medical condition in case you heard it as 'into sex' - though that can't be ruled out as a future topic).

Today the group is exploring the very Blake poem from which it takes its name (and it has, very generously, invited a clergy-person, Lindsay, to introduce the discussion). Upcoming topics include Faith in a Care home, Faith in the Public Square, and The relation of Love and Justice.

You might now see why the existence of the St James's Vagabonds gives me delight and encouragement and hope. I hope you feel the same way. We should be proud of this rebellious but fundamentally good and adventurous teenager of ours. It represents the church being and doing what it should always be and do: a place of community and enquiry and equality and celebration. What, I ask you, could be more sacramental?

Do take a look at Dick's memoir marking the (more or less) 15th anniversary of Vagabonds. In it you will hear of our beloved John Ince, an early co-founder who later left for work in Australia and died young in tragic circumstances but whose presence seems still very strong for those of us who knew him. God be thanked for you, John. And of other key figures in nurturing the group over these first years, especially David, Leon and Cornell.

In his poem, William Blake uses the image of the ale-house to represent all that celebrates human community and a place free from external authority. The fire around which the vagabonds gather is to be read not only as a source of warmth against the cold but as a source of creativity. In Christian teaching fire is

a symbol of the Holy Spirit. And though it seems pretty clear that Blake's reference to church is a critical one - this is a place of repression, control and anti-imagination - yet it seems to suggest change is possible:

*But if at the Church they would give us some Ale,
And a pleasant fire, our souls to regale;
We'd sing and we'd pray, all the live-long day;
Nor ever once wish from the Church to stray,
Then the Parson might preach & drink & sing,
And we'd be as happy as birds in the spring...*

I have often observed how the church seems able to appropriate and somehow hang on to its wayward sons and daughters. It has an almost touching way of taking criticism on the chin and holding no grudge. It seems to have done this with William Blake – think of that (almost) over-sung hymn Jerusalem; words by William Blake who made such clear and fierce criticism of the church of his day. And so I had better be careful in asking what he might make of the community which today occupies the building in which he (as an un-consenting infant, it has to be noted) was baptised into Christ's Mystical Body.

He would note that we are still part of the Church of England 'by law established'. And we still have clergy and I suppose, allowing for translation, we still have our 'Dame(s) Lurch [of both sexes] who are always at church'. But he might also notice with at least some approval the way in which this place in its present incarnation takes seriously some of his own most central concerns: less hierarchy, more egalitarianism, the participation of everyone in our liturgies, and that everyone's voice may be heard (Now, what would he have made of the Liturgy of the Notices, open to anyone and sometimes taking longer than our sermons?) And sometimes we even have singing and dancing and drinking in church...

But we must be careful. His message is that 'church' is not the building or the priest or the liturgy: it is life; all of it. And we are all its celebrants in every place and every calling: our homes and hearths, our schools and workplaces, in our leisure, in our labour, in our sorrow and in our joy.

All of us are summoned to be holy vagabonds: affirming of all goodness wherever found and in

whatever guise; challenging of all authority and power save that of God and love and kindness and forgiveness. Suspicious of all the priests who pontificate and judge and finger-wag and order, whether they be found in churches or the spheres of government, business, the media or found (we must never forget) in ourselves. They are all to be exorcised, says Blake, with mirth and merriment and good nature.

To be a vagabond in this Blakeian sense is not all cosy and we must not romanticise it, or him. Today's Gospel makes this plain [Luke 12.49-56]. "Do you think that I have come to bring peace to the earth? No, I tell you, but rather division! From now on, five in one household will be divided, three against two and two against three..". The wider canvas of the Gospels makes this abundantly clear. Blake understood this and was no stranger to suffering and distress and the horror of human

behaviour. Interestingly, his grasp of the anti-Christian nature of hierarchies and the privilege which sustains them still eludes most church-goers, certainly in our own Church of England.

Today's Gospel ends with Jesus saying these words: "When you see a cloud rising in the west, you immediately say, "It is going to rain"; and so it happens. And when you see the south wind blowing, you say, "There will be scorching heat"; and it happens. You hypocrites! You know how to interpret the appearance of earth and sky, but why do you not know how to interpret the present time?".

Blake interpreted his time with a rare clarity. And across the centuries he appears to do it still, for ours. Thank you God, for every William Blake. Amen.

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