

18th August 2018

(Said) Evening Prayer, 9th Sunday after Trinity

Old Testament Isaiah 28: 9-22

New Testament 2 Corinthians 8: 1-9

A few weeks ago, I was busy booking our family holiday. I don't really mind where we go, but there are some things I do care about! A good view, near to water, a dishwasher and a decent shower are all fairly high on my list. But the highest priority on my list and, until the recent proliferation of photos on booking websites, sometime the most difficult to ascertain in advance; is the quality of the bed. A good night's sleep (or 7) on my holiday is important; and an uncomfy bed, be it too small, too bouncy, or having an ominous dent in the middle, is probably the surest way to dampen my holiday mood. I've been to previous holiday cottages where the bed is so bad I've ended up sleeping on the floor, and we even went to one where we arrived to discover the middle of the bed was held up by a pile of books!

So imagine knowing there are two rooms on offer...

One has a superking bed, with a firm divan base, cool, freshly laundered sheets, and a warm, but not too warm, down duvet, topped off with a super-soft blanket.

The other has a short, toddler-sized bed, with a cheap, second hand mattress, and one itchy blanket, which is simultaneous too short, too narrow and too thin. It may, or may not, have bed bugs...

Which would you choose?

This is the analogy that the prophet Isaiah is using in our reading this evening...

God has offered his people a resting place; a place of security, comfort and repose,

But the people have chosen a different refuge.

They have chosen a 'bed too short to stretch out on' and a 'blanket too narrow to wrap around' them.¹

The prophet Isaiah is one of Israel's most prominent prophets and evangelists, writing this first section in around the 7th Century BC (the current wisdom is that Isaiah, the book, can be split into 3 sections, with the later two written some time later, by a different 'Isaiah').

It is not certain where the hearers had chosen to make their bed, but we hear them boasting; 'we have entered into a covenant with death', so that 'when an overwhelming scourge sweeps by, it cannot touch us'.²

It is likely then, that they have made their bed with a stronger power in the middle east, perhaps an alliance with Egypt.

And, having cosied up with the big boys, they don't think they need God any more...

And because they don't think they need God, God's words have become like gibberish to them. They take a little bit 'a rule for this, a rule for that', but it isn't the heart and soul of their being any more. They scatter a sprinkling of faith through their lives 'a little here, a little there'; but it's a just dusting, they have strayed so far from God's teaching that they can't even recognise it any more! Even their priests have become drunkards 'who stagger from beer and are befuddled by wine'!

The people have made their beds, and now they must lie in them – as uncomfortable as they are!

But those who have set God as the sure foundation; those who do rely on God as their cornerstone; how different it is for them. They will never been stricken with panic, they will know that true resting place with God.

So where will you find your rest? Where will you choose to make your bed?

¹ Isaiah 8.20

² Isaiah 8.15

Later in Isaiah, we hear how God 'gives strength to the weary and increases the power of the weak', and how even when we grow tired, physically and mentally exhausted, those who hope in the Lord 'will renew their strength. They will soar on wings like eagles; they will run and not grow weary, they will walk and not be faint'.³

Jesus says to us, in one of my favourite pieces of scripture;

'Come to me, all of you who are weary and carry heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you. Let me teach you, because I am humble and gentle at heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy to bear, and the burden I give you is light.'⁴

When we choose to walk with God, we are choosing that superking bed and premium quality goose down duvet. We are choosing to lay down our heads in a place of refuge; where God will grant us rest, comfort and security.

Of course, sometimes we have to be awake too. Sometimes we have to go forth into the world, full of strong courage, to meet the trials of everyday life head on... But we know that that place of rest is always there for us, that God is always waiting to gather us up under her wings when the slings and arrows of life are becoming too great. We can go forward to meet the difficulties that life has to throw at us, because we know that resting-place is ready for when we need it!

I remember, when I was a new sleep-deprived mum, that feeling that I could do anything, if I could only have an unbroken 8 hours... many have written about the palliative care of a good night's sleep, how the worries of the day will fade, when granted the gift of a good night's rest... We each crave, as Macbeth does,

"Sleep that knits up the ravelled sleeve of care
The death of each day's life, sore labour's bath
Balm of hurt minds, great nature's second course,
Chief nourisher in life's feast."⁵

³ Isaiah 40.29-31

⁴ Matthew 11.28-30

⁵ William Shakespeare, Macbeth

We crave sleep and aye, it is one of life's greatest necessities.

And when we choose to rest God's bed, we choose exactly that healing, nourishing balm.....

And yes, sometimes choosing to find our peace with God feels risky. The world can offer more instant gratification, and when we're feeling insecure and tired, the temporary comfort of something more worldly can be tempting..., be that a glass or two of wine, a tub of ice cream, the numbing relief of the first hit, the security of money, or the powerful protection of a popular but slightly dishonest work colleague... But true comfort and security comes from God; and when we seek it elsewhere, we stop being able to see that truth. God's promises become a jumble of words and we dismiss the safety of them, as wishful thinking for those too naive to face up to reality.

And so, in our letter of St Paul to the Corinthians, we see the oblique contrast, between the church in Macedonia (hard pressed, under a severe ordeal of affliction and in extreme poverty) , and the church in Corinth. Despite all their troubles, the church in Macedonia has made their bed with God, and have responded to his grace with abundant generosity. The church in Corinth? Perhaps..., Paul, with practised subtlety implies,... perhaps they are finding their security elsewhere.

And so, let us this week, find our repose with God and the Lord Almighty grants us a quiet night and a perfect rest - because in God we have all the safety, security and comfort we need.