

'THE BATTLE OF CABLE STREET' - Rector's sermon, 2 October 2011 (Trinity 15, Proper 22A)

Our Father, we pray, as Jesus taught us. Much of his teaching sought to show the Jews that God is not remote or distant or angry, but close at hand and full of love. We can enter into an intimate relationship with God, much as we can with a loving earthly father. But this can be a problem for those whose experience of their earthly father is negative, or non-existent: those whose father is a figure of fear or hatred or abuse, or whose father is absent. This is the case for many children growing up in Tower Hamlets: they have grown up with no father around, to provide a role model; or if he is around, he comes and goes unpredictably, bringing tension or even violence to the home.

Jesus taught today's parable - which used to be called the parable of the wicked husbandmen - to show the Jews that God, *our Father*, loves and cares for his people. Even if God seemed to be distant, through the ages he had not abandoned them, but sent holy men to lead and guide them - prophets and priests - and in these last days had now sent his own son - a risky enterprise, but the surest sign of his love. Jesus modelled the parable on Isaiah's song of the vineyard, written hundreds of years earlier - words that would have been familiar to many of his hearers. As a sign of love for his people, God - *my beloved*, Isaiah calls him - plants and tends a vineyard in the hope that it will yield a rich harvest. He wants to be a good landlord, but the people ignore him, and the vineyard falls into ruin. For Isaiah, this was a warning about the imminent collapse of a nation which had abandoned God and spurned his loving-kindness. For Jesus, it becomes, like all the parables, a message about the kingdom of God, and it tells of the role that his son has in inaugurating this kingdom. The Jewish leaders didn't like it, because he was pointing a finger at them, and saying that the kingdom will be taken from them and given to others who respond in the right way to God's loving and gracious initiative.

Now just as the image of God as loving Father is difficult for some people to grasp, so the image of God as the good landlord, who cares both for his property and for his tenants, is difficult for those whose experience of being tenants is a negative one - whose landlords are distant and remote, who don't seem to care about their tenants, and indeed exploit them. This was very much the case in Stepney and Whitechapel in the 1930s, when most housing in the area was provided by rogue landlords who let out slums at extortionate rates and did nothing to maintain or repair the property, but still kept sending their agents to collect the rents, by force and intimidation. You don't need me to tell you how appalling the housing conditions were in this parish at that time (and indeed for a couple of decades afterwards). Council housing replaced some of the worst slums, but the problems persisted (and council tenants too had their grievances).

That is why Fr John Groser, who at that time was vicar of Christ Church Watney Street, became one of the founders, and the president, of the Stepney Tenants Defence League in the 1930s. It all began with housing surgeries in his vicarage, and it brought together a wide range of individuals and groups from the community. Some of these were Jewish, for at that time Jews were among those who experienced the worst discrimination when it came to housing; they had to settle for some of the worst, most overcrowded, housing conditions. Of course, some of the slum landlords were Jewish too, and the League challenged them just as much as the others.



This weekend sees the 75th anniversary of the Battle of Cable Street in 1936, with events yesterday and today, with a march from Wilton's to the mural in the Gardens [pictured above] in a couple of hours' time. In case you don't know what this is all about, the Battle was a concerted attempt to stop Mosley and his fascist blackshirts provocatively parading through the East End - just as in recent weeks EDL have sought to do the same. The law then allowed them to march in uniforms (it was changed the following year) and there were no police powers, as there are now, to ban the march. The conflict came to a head on the corner of Cable Street and Dock Street (where there is a plaque marking the event); here local groups came together in an attempt to halt the march, with the slogan (from the Spanish Civil War the previous year 'they shall not pass', *no pasaran*). It was a bloody affair, as films and pictures of the time show.

The local groups who resisted the Mosleyites were a motley crew. There were trade unions, socialists, anarchists, communists - with many Jews among these groups (including the redoubtable Max Levitas, still going strong at 96) - Irish dockers, as well as concerned local residents who were appalled by Mosley's anti-semitic rhetoric. Among them was the Stepney Tenants' Defence League - Fr Groser was out on the streets that day, and got his nose broken by a police baton. (He was no stranger to public demonstrations: as a curate in Poplar, he and his brother-in-law had run street corner Catholic crusades, always backed by a crucifix, a flag of St George (he couldn't abide the Union Jack) and the Red Flag.) The tenants' league had worked to bring people together, and they were determined to resist those who sought to drive the community apart - just as community and faith groups sought to do recently when the EDL announced their intentions.

Today's offertory hymn became the anthem, or clarion-call, of Christian Socialists of Fr Groser's ilk, and was often sung here after he took charge of this parish after the Blitz. It's not great poetry, but we're singing it today in honour of those days, and in solidarity with the events of 75 years ago (omitting three of the original verses). It was originally called 'A Hymn for St George and for Justice'; its first line was *Dear patron saint of England, St George, our Lady's Knight, we ask your prayers and blessings to aid us in our fight*, and the chorus ran *Uplift St George's banner and let the ancient cry 'St George for Merrie England' re-echo to the sky*. This 'merrie England' theme, and its link to St George, reflected the medieval nostalgia that underlay much Christian Socialist thinking in the past [more on website], but seems very quaint today, which is why Ken Leech revised the text, and it's his version that we sing today (as we hold Ken in our prayers). His version of the chorus makes clear that the 'ancient cry' doesn't just date back to the time of the crusades, but to the days of the biblical prophets. Incidentally, the hymn has traditionally been sung to either of two well-known tunes - the one for 'We plough the fields and scatter', and Gustav Holst's tune *Thaxted*, more often sung for 'I vow to thee, my country'. (*Thaxted*, in Essex, was the Mecca for Christian socialists, and the Holst family lived here and provided music for the parish church.) Since we'll be singing the harvest tune next week, today we'll sing it to *Thaxted*.

Its most striking line - bringing us back to today's gospel - is *God is the only landlord to whom our rents are due; he made the earth for all men, and not for just a few*. Doggerel maybe, but what is the point it's making? It's not a call for rent strikes (though I dare say it was used in this way by some Christian activists), but is a declaration about the challenge of Christian stewardship that should direct all our actions. God is indeed the landlord of all creation, and we are God's stewards - charged to cherish and protect God's creation, and give due account to God of our stewardship. And that commits us to working for justice and peace: for God's kingdom is for all men and women, and not for just a chosen few who happen to have power and influence and money - like the wicked husbandmen of the parable who used their power to oppress and crush others, or like the slum landlords of Stepney in former years, or like all those in the world today for whom the pound, or the dollar, is all that matters. As the previous verse of the hymn says, *love, the only master, will strive with might and greed, till might is right no longer, and right is might indeed*.

At the heart of today's parable is an indictment of those who fail to recognise the legitimate claims of God's heir to his vineyard, the one who came to bring us back to God. *This is my Son, listen to him*, says God - but they did not; instead, they crucified the lord of glory. Today, then, as we recall the Battle of Cable Street 75 years on, and give thanks that some - though very far from all - local Christians joined in resisting the evils of fascism; and as we recall the commitment of Fr Groser and others to housing justice in our area; we pledge ourselves with all who are marching today to God's cause. Today's marchers will have many different social and political allegiances, and some of them overtly deny the claims of religion; but we stand firm in opposing evil in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ.