

“Under the Thumb”

Have you ever felt, “Under the Thumb”? Oppressed by a person or situation that leaves you powerless? I once had a job on the shop floor of a factory. Overlooking the shop floor where we all worked was a glass pod, with views into the factory from all sides. In the pod sat the owner and his manager. You could never escape from their beady gaze, and it was impossible not to feel, under their power and control at all times. We were definitely “Under the Thumb.” Perhaps you’ve known it at work too, or at home, under the thumb of a partner, a parent or even one of our children! Sometimes we can feel powerless or “under the thumb” of harsh fate or merciless ill health. Where is God when we lose control over our lives?

Thomas Balsall, my predecessor here in the 15th century didn’t feel under anyone’s thumb. He was the Dean of the College and Rector of this Collegiate Church. The College had a very healthy income, and Balsall was able to pay five priests, four choirboys, a Curate for Luddington, as well as having enough money left over to build the magnificent Chancel that we still enjoy today. The College income gave the church and its Rector unparalleled independence, and were certainly under nobody’s control.

In 1548 however everything changed. The Protestant boy king Edward VI was now on the throne and the College here was suppressed and its annual income of £127 18 shillings and nine pence seized by the crown. The Guild was dissolved too with its income of £43 also being taken away. Holy Trinity church went overnight from riches to rags, with all its treasures, property and income seized by the Crown.

The future was deeply uncertain until June 1553, when Edward VI, in the last week of his life, signed a Charter giving back most of the church’s assets. However, they did not come back to the Rector of Holy Trinity, they were given over to form the new Corporation or Town Council. The communal wealth and power of the town passed from priest to politicians, from church to local government. The Charter required the Town Council to pay the Vicar, as he was now called, an annual stipend of £20, to provide him with a house, and to pay the costs of an Assistant Minister. In

theory this sounds good. The clergy were free to get on with their task without the distractions of wealth and property.

But with the wealth came power, and the Town Councillors were not slow to use it. If a Vicar was appointed whom they didn't like, they just refused to pay them. If they did something the Council didn't like, payments were delayed or reduced. When the Vicar sought to choose his Assistant as was customary, the Councillors insisted that they should choose, as they were the ones who would be paying. The housing of the Vicar was doubtless a source of manipulation and dispute as well as the multiple Vicarages in Stratford over the years suggests. "Under the Thumb" was often the new reality in Stratford, with priest more dependent on politicians than was comfortable or healthy.

Thankfully those days have gone, though echoes still remain. The old church money is still in Stratford of course, all these years later, and they are now held by Stratford Town Trust. They are good partners but sometimes when we are pleading for some of their funds for something here it can feel like the old days are here again!

At least now all clergy in the Church of England receive the same stipend whether the parishes they serve are rich or poor. The money comes not from local or national government but from you and me, ordinary churchgoers, giving week by week. That can be a struggle but it is the source of our independence as a church and frees us from being "Under the Thumb" of politicians as in the past. Free to act with gospel independence and integrity.

The Jews in Jesus time knew what it was like to be "Under the Thumb". Under the Thumb of the Roman Empire and the puppet king Herod. The church or Temple manipulated and corrupted by politicians who controlled all their wealth, property and position. Jesus foretold that Jerusalem and its Temple would come crashing down, as we heard in our Gospel reading today, and they did with terrible loss of life in AD 70 as the Romans destroyed the Jewish state once and for all. As we read in Mark 13, Jesus had warned his followers of all the persecution and trouble that they would face in his name, but gave them the will to hold firm and true within it all, confident in the love and ultimate reality of God.

The central truth for them and for us is that health, wealth, and happiness may come and go. We may have some power and control over our lives, or we may be firmly under the thumb.

But however bad things get, God is real, and God is love for us, and ultimately nothing else matters.

So, lets be quiet for a moment. Close our eyes and be still in God's presence. Do you feel "Under the Thumb" of another or of circumstance you cannot control? Lift to God your powerlessness. Remember that God is real and that God loves you.

What might he be saying to you right now?

Sermon preached at:

The Collegiate Church of the Holy Trinity, Stratford-upon-Avon

19 November 2006