

Christmas 1: 2017 St Thomas on The Bourne.

I have just finished reading a novel called *Offshore* by Penelope Fitzgerald. It was published in 1979 and won the Booker Prize for that year. It centres on a small family consisting of a mother, a hopeless father and two deliciously insightful girls who all live on a leaking old barge on the Thames on Chelsea Reach...and the book is a winsome delight.

As a result of reading that novel I am now half way through a monster of a biography of Penelope Fitzgerald by Hermione Lee...and what I have learnt from that is that the novel was based on the real-life hardships of the author who herself, with two daughters and a son, plus her hopeless husband, lived on a leaking, damp barge on the Thames for a couple of years.

Penelope Fitzgerald's grandfather, her mother's father, had been the Bishop of Lincoln and her father's father had been the Bishop of Manchester. She herself had gone to Oxford, to Somerville where she was known as the Blonde Bombshell and was regarded as a golden girl, exceptionally able, charming and highly intelligent. She then married a handsome man who was serving as an officer in the Irish Guards during the Second World War. All looked set fair for them both...except that after the War her husband had trained as a fairly ineffective barrister; he began to drink and became an alcoholic. Previous to her time on the barge, Penelope Fitzgerald and her husband and their three children had flitted from house to house, their creditors chasing them, and then, to feed his addiction, her husband began to dip his hand in the till at his Middle Temple chambers and was struck off. Their social decline was swift and awful...and it ended with them living in penury on the leaking Thames barge named ironically, *Grace*.

In order to make ends meet, Penelope Fitzgerald began to teach...and was very successful at it in her own idiosyncratic way...but underneath her tragically difficult life she had always wanted to write. At the age of 58 she wrote her first book ...it was about the artist Burne-Jones. Other novels followed, including *Offshore* which she wrote when she was 62. It would seem from all that her family and her pupils said, her gift for writing was remarkable....but it had taken decades to break through. It had been bubbling away beneath the surface for decades.

Hold on to that for a moment.

Now turn to today's OT reading: Isaiah 61, 10-62, 3. Let me read it to you:

I delight greatly in the Lord;

my soul rejoices in my God.

For he has clothed me with garments of salvation

and arrayed me in a robe of his righteousness,

*as a bridegroom adorns his head like a priest,
and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels.*

*For as the soil makes the sprout come up
and a garden causes seeds to grow,
so the Sovereign Lord will make righteousness
and praise spring up before all nations.*

We are still in the dead of winter. Branches are bare; the earth is locked in by frost. But somewhere just below the surface, life is already preparing to stir. It may take several weeks yet before those underground disturbances break the surface...tho' I notice in our garden the narcissi have already speared their way through towards the light...but for the most part we have to take on trust that the glorious shoots of Spring are on their way. So we wait...not something we are very good at. We are, as a generation, too anxious, too driven...

...but now pause for a moment and consider this...

At Funeral Services the priest intones the words *Earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust*. If that is who we are, earth, ashes and dust, might our spiritual selves have to follow the deep processes of nature in the same way that our bodies do?

Perhaps there will be times when we have to endure the deadness of spiritual winter so that a new Spring may arrive.

I have made it sound easy. It isn't. It isn't. The apparent absence of God can be terrible; the absence of hope is awful, an anguish of soul that is almost unbearable. We cannot sense any underground stirrings: all colour, shape and form are drained from our spiritual lives. Death itself seems to be lodged in our very souls.

And yet...and yet...the poetic cry from Isaiah is one of a glorious Spring waiting to break the surface.

*For as the soil makes the sprout come up
and a garden causes seeds to grow,
so the Sovereign Lord will make righteousness
and praise spring up before all nations.*

The radiance and prodigal glory of new life are almost upon us. Paradise gardens will overwhelm us with their beauty, and God himself will walk with us in the cool of the day.

Who knows what this New Year will bring to us collectively and individually...we simply cannot know. But I take from authors such as Penelope Fitzgerald, and from the prophet Isaiah that within our innermost being, though we may not be aware of it, God is deeply and gently at work... waiting to break through the surface of our lives when the time is right.

It is in that faith in Christ who was called Immanuel, God with us that we can step into the New Year knowing that come what may, God is deep within us and knowing too that his love for us can never ever be broken. Out of the darkness the light and life of God always break through...

The Rt Revd Christopher Herbert.