

The fifth Sunday after Trinity, 5 July 2026, Year A, Proper 9
Readings: Psalm 55.1-15, Deuteronomy 24.10-end, Acts 28.1-16

Lord God, open our ears, our eyes, and our hearts that we may hear and receive your Word, even Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen

For us, Jesus College Choir, it is - with regret - Goodnight Vienna. This service forms our last singing engagement in a lovely week in your remarkable city. St Luke's words in Acts still ring true. *The natives showed us unusual kindness*. Whilst we may or may not have hit the tear-jerking heights of that final performance in *The Sound of Music*, nevertheless we hope to have made an impression, as you have on us. It is genuinely sad to be bidding you Auf Wiedersehen.

Tonight there are further notes of farewell, quite aside from Austria's World Cup exit - not that we English should brag just yet. In the Anglican calendar, Thomas More is remembered. On 5th July, 1535, he sent a final letter from his cell in the Tower of London, using a piece of charcoal to write on cloth. Addressed to his eldest daughter Meg, this poignant goodbye was penned the night before his execution for treason. Famously it ends with the dying hope that they would 'merrily meet in heaven'.

Whereas in this country, I believe today is remembered for the so-called 'blank cheque' which Germany issued Austria-Hungary in 1914 in the immediate aftermath of Archduke Ferdinand's assassination, promising to underwrite any response their ally might choose to make. And so, thus emboldened, a fragile peace unwound ... was waved away.

Rowan Williams, the former Archbishop of Canterbury, stated once that a Christian leader must preach 'with a Bible in one hand and a newspaper in the other'. More often this week, it's been a Lonely Planet guidebook and a copy of Tom Stoppard's last play, *Leopoldstadt*, named after the Viennese quarter closely associated with centuries of Jewish settlement and resettlement.

I was in that city suburb on Thursday night when the match against Spain kicked off. In the central square, outside every bar, supporters semi-circled giant screens. But my eyes were drawn to a simple plaque on the wall. In memory of a young Jew and student activist, one Alfred Och/shorn, whose resistance to fascism ran to fighting in the Spanish Civil War when both that country and his Austrian homeland began embracing that ugly ideology. Alfred would die in a Nazi concentration camp in 1943 at the hands of a teenage guard. He was only 28 himself.

Although Czech-born, Vienna fascinated Stoppard, and he set a number of his plays here, including the deliriously pun-popping *On the Razzle*, about a works' outing to the city, an escape involving high jinks and giddy good humour. It could have been written for this sociable choir!

But *Leopoldstadt* is Stoppard's masterpiece, arguably part autobiography, a family saga set across four key moments in the first half of the twentieth century. A generation on from Emperor Franz Josef's edict that they are to enjoy full rights of citizenship, many in the Jewish community have left the ghetto, and now reside on the Ringstrasse. They have converted and intermarried. They are Jewish and Protestant and Catholic. Their children are baptised and circumcised, even 'in the same week'. In a word, they are assimilated - or so it seems. But one character reads the signs - signs which are there to be read long before the rise of Hitler. 'Assimilation doesn't mean to stop being a Jew,' he argues. 'Assimilation means to carry on being a Jew without insult'.

The title of the play is short-hand then for targeted discrimination, of the sort well-described in tonight's psalm: 'I hath seen violence and strife in the city. Fearfulness and trembling are come upon me, horror hath overwhelmed me.'

But *Leopoldstadt* is also a definition of community; a place where people of a kind live together whether by choice or necessity. Its story testifies to the way that the identity and interpretation of a place and people can change almost arbitrarily through the currents of history. As the play itself asserts, it is important not to forget the realities of the past that can over time be lost or obscured.

Of course, some Viennese Jews escaped the death camps through emigration, but many did not. They would not leave simply because they could not abandon their city. 'Do you want to do mathematics in the desert or in the city where Haydn, Mozart and Beethoven overlapped,' another of Stoppard's characters opines. 'We're Austrian. Viennese. Doctors come from around the world to study here. Philosophers, Architects. A city of art lovers and intellectuals like no other.'

But perhaps Oxford runs you close. Stoppard often told the story of an open-air production of *The Tempest* staged by a lake in the gardens of one of the colleges.

When it became time for Ariel to leave the action of the play, he turned and he ran up the stage, away from the audience. Now the stage was a lawn, and the lawn backed onto a lake. He ran across the grass and got to the edge of the lake, and he just kept running, because the director had had the foresight to put a plank walkway just underneath the surface of the water. So you have to imagine: it's become dusk, and quite a lot of the artificial lighting has come on, and back there in the gloom is this lake. And Ariel says his last words and he turns and he runs and gets to the water and he runs and he goes splish splash, splish splash right across the lake into the enfolding dark, until one can only just hear his footsteps making these little sounds, and then ultimately his little figure disappeared from view. And at that moment, from the further shore, a firework rocket was ignited and just went whoosh into the sky and burst into lots of sparks. All the sparks went out one by one and Ariel had gone. But here's the thing: you can't write anything as good as that. When you look it up, the script simply says 'Exit, Ariel.'

Our time is up too. Let us sing now of that far shore, of a new heaven, mindful of the faith that informs it. Facts are only ever facts. Truth is something quite different, fleshed out with God-given imagination. It brings alive those biblical laws ... those Sabbath principles that emphasise social justice, compassion, and practical welfare, like leaving portions of agricultural harvests for the poor rather than creaming everything off for one's own. Sabbath means more than simply taking some time off. It is 'the affirmation that people, like land, cannot ultimately be owned or managed. They are in covenant with us, and so lines of dignity and respect and freedom are drawn around them which must be honoured by all' (Brueggemann).

In hope of a new heaven, for ever and ever. Amen.