

St Peter and St Paul. 31st August 2014

Romans 12. 9-end, Matthew 16. 21-end

Almighty God, help us to see your truth in the words we read, and show how that truth can transform our lives. In Jesus name. Amen

At one level its all looking very nice -an Anglican church in a beautiful village. It's well cared for, and there are a reasonable number of people here. More than that -we are all rather lovely. Polite and warm and friendly. We know and trust one another -look out for anyone who is having a tough time -contribute both time and money for the common good. If you go out into the village and ask people about this church - even if they don't actually pitch up to any services they are mostly appreciative and glad we are here.

For many, maybe even most of the folk here if you asked them the question that our gospel reading asks us this morning -the fundamental question about who you are -the 'what's the point' question -then being Christian and being part of the church would form part of that identity.

We have looked at this text before and it is one of the hardest, most challenging of Jesus' saying: 'What kind of deal is it to get everything you want but lose yourself? What could you ever trade your soul for?'

It's the Faustian question -it's the familiar: 'No one on their death bed wishes they'd spent more time in the office' -question. How do you work out what sort of a person you want to become? In a way its not even a specifically Christian question -it s simply about being human - maybe being humane.

The Epistle reading from Romans today fleshes it out. We'll take a look at it in a moment.

But that idyllic village church picture I painted just now.....Well- the way things are looking we might well be the last generation able to enjoy it. The stats are more than worrying. You probably heard last week that the Methodist is facing a drop of one third on their attendance. The stats for us in the Cof E are not much better -we have deeper resources and the cracks are not showing quite as much. But our congregations are

aging rapidly. We are already at a stage when what we would love to be able to do is being severely limited by our human resources -and across the country not only are young people disconnected, but many believe that the church is a toxic brand. That what we stand for is harmful for the life of the individual and the community.

Next week we have a PCC meeting and we are looking at these human resources -Mike O'Farrell reckons we need to stop doing at least 5 of our activities -needing say 10 people -simply to recover from the 12 people who have either died, moved away or had to limit what they can do this last year. Total management sense, but of course a strategy for genteel decline not growth.

The other side of this is that other denominations and indeed religions are not in decline, nor is what we are seeing in this country with Christianity mirrored the other side of the world. Is our problem, one might well argue, that we have become too soft? That our form of faith demands too little; that the strict obligations and duties that others put on their followers commands more devotion and commitment. Maybe when the church actually does offer freedom rather than control we use that freedom to escape.....

Is the only way to keep people in church, working their socks off, and giving their money -is the only way to do it actually through guilt?

Of course, as you might expect, I think the answer is profoundly 'no' to that question -but it does need to be asked. Are we running a model of church that fails to take account of the level of individualism that is where our society is in 2014? We are educated, we think for ourselves. Consider our relationship to our Doctors for example. The whole Daddy knows best thing is gone for ever. When we are told something we are not sure about -well -we go home and check it on the internet. The church likewise cannot simply tell us what to believe. The Catholic Church still tries, but they have an even bigger disconnect between the official line and what people actually think.

So -too soft eh? Actually I believe the opposite is true. Being Christian is too hard -too challenging -too costly. It is so, so much more than telling people the rules and assuring them that if they follow them they'll be deemed 'good'

The trouble is that it is all about what you **do** -as Christians we are not defined by what we are against that's actually quite easy....but not at all what it's about. And most especially it is not about who you

exclude -protecting the gates of heaven and keeping the club exclusive - again quite easy – but not the challenge of our faith at all.

So this finding who you truly, deeply are, and then living in that light - this ‘finding your life’ business -what does it entail? Throughout history we have been working on it -and it’s not just the Christians who get glimpses of the truth. If you get a chance do look, on youtube at Tim Minchin’s address at the University of Western Australia as they give him an honorary doctorate.

(<https://www.facebook.com/video.php?v=10152625573641844&set=vb.362258071843&type=2&theater>) I suspect he’d call himself a humanist -but he is inspirational about a good way to live. Discovering how to live well is essentially a human venture and as Christians we have our own language for articulating it -and that then transcends our own personal ‘God made in our own image’ and gives us a touchstone of something, someone greater. We look to the life of Christ to express fully the need to put love and sacrifice before our obsession with self. And we also look at Christ to see that he died for us all.....ALL.

In other words, as Giles Fraser said on Friday: ‘Morally, the category of the human ought to be entirely indivisible: all being of equal worth, irrespective of wealth, colour, class, ability. Some people are better at sport or sums, but nobody is better at being human, neither are there better sorts of human beings.’

In our Epistle reading this morning St Paul was saying just this. Listen up:

‘ Live in harmony with one another; do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly; do not claim to be wiser than you are.’

-Now these are the nursery steps -but even this is hard. I’ve been catching some of the Trollope on the Radio recently -and of course historically being a church go-er involved social status -not to mention social control. Not so long ago we still spoke of the CofE as the Tory party at prayer. No more -there is no social dividend to worship -indeed you could say the opposite is true. So faith exposes you to equality rather than protecting you -and as we all know –equality is challenging.

Paul piles on the pressure -lets try ‘The Message’ for a moment -

‘Love from the centre of who you are; don’t fake it. Run for dear life from evil; hold on for dear life to good. Be good friends who love deeply; practice playing second fiddle.’

This is so tough. It's about your actions springing from the truth about who you are. BE a loving person -don't just pretend to be one. Choose, actively choose good. Take friendship seriously, and don't be beguiled by status.

It goes on -interesting one this:

‘Don't burn out; keep yourselves fueled and aflame.’ BUT at the same time.... ‘Don't quit in the hard times; pray all the harder.’

We are being invited to take responsibility, make choices, live with integrity.....This is a whole world away from following a rule book. There isn't a big stick -insofar as we are answerable then it is to ourselves and who we become -and crucially it is to one another. – ‘Help needy Christians; be inventive in hospitality’ -A Christian is the sort of person who will help folk in need, give them a meal -because that is the sort of person they ARE.

None of this is that easy to do, even when we genuinely like and trust the people around us. Jesus nailed it ; ‘By this will people know that you are my followers, by the way you love one another.’

It's so much easier to be motivated by the negatives. Look at the amount of money and energy created by the anti HS2 movement.

But the biggest challenge, as ever, is about how you cope with your enemies. This is profoundly personal -this stuff about loving people who are hard to love gets all of us in the end -it took Christ to the cross; but it is also a massive challenge for us as a country if we want to continue to say we are a Christian country.

Lets start with the personal. Paul says: ‘Bless your enemies; no cursing under your breath.’ ‘ Don't hit back; discover beauty in everyone. If you've got it in you, get along with everyone. ‘Don't insist on revenge.’

This is what should be fundamentally different about a Christian. This is what was so fundamentally different about Jesus. All the injustice and violence of the world landed on him, and yet, with the resources of heaven and earth in his little finger, he did not respond with violence but with forgiveness.

This is the story of our world.

Violence begets violence.

We say: ‘How can one human being do this to another?’

We think we are different, but huge, massive, difficult issue for every Christian is how can we shape ourselves in the likeness of Christ and not collude with humanity destroying scrip of violence?

And the detail matters.

When you say: ‘I really like so and so, BUT.....and then proceed to do some small violence to their reputation.’

When you say: ‘I’m not letting her get away with that.’

When you think: ‘I’ve never liked people who.....

Or when there are people in your family you don’t talk to...

Or when you inflict your broken relationship issues on your children

Or when.....

Small, private wars.....colluding with the script of world violence.

.....
.....

At the moment we are in the midst of what feels like a perfect storm. It will only resolve when compromise and forgiveness are introduced. I don’t know how you ever forgive someone who has killed your son.....

I’ve spoken to an Israeli man who said the people of Gaza had done just that.

I don’t know how you ever forgive someone who has killed you son.

That’s why I’m a Christian -because God forgives those who kill his son.

Just don’t tell me its easy -that we ask too little of the faithful Christian to make it worth bothering.

Our problem is that it is too hard –certainly too hard to do alone -that’s why we have one another. That’s why this church is worth all the heartache and effort and sacrifice. It ain’t easy, but its crucial.

Amen