**SERMON FOR LENT 2 | 25.02.2018**

**A few people have already noticed that we have started to put up a poster indicating the sermon theme for the coming week. And the current poster says: ‘Does religion have to be so hard?’ As a topic it has certainly given me plenty to think about – and it is drawn from the key phrase of today’s Gospel: *if anyone wants to be a follower of mine, let them take up their cross and follow me…!***

**We are all very familiar with crosses – around our necks, on top of spires, on the front of prayer books and in all kinds of places inside Church. But it took a visit to Seville Cathedral to make me look at the appalling nature of a real cross. There, in the entrance, was the most enormous cross - bigger than life size – with the figure of Jesus, dying in agony as his body slumped forward from the rough- hewn wood – blood pouring from his wounds and from the crown of thorns on his head. It was – it is – ghastly, and I tried to make sense of the familiar words of the liturgy as I stood there: *We adore you, O Christ and we bless you, because by your Holy Cross you have redeemed the world.***

**And I am still trying to make sense of it: to understand how the Cross is the key to the whole Christian experience. Why does religion have to be so hard?**

**Because I am deeply aware that, on Sunday mornings, there is every reason not to come to Church. Starting with a chance of a lie-in after a busy week, there are any number of activities, especially for children, that are scheduled especially for Sunday mornings. *Weekends are for getting out of town* was the familiar cry when I first arrived in Islington from Bradford nine years ago.**

**And when we get to Church, is it all we might hope for? Will we get an adrenalin rush from what we hear and see? Will I feel comforted and affirmed by people I know (and don’t know), will I be stimulated and refreshed? Always?**

**Fr Timothy Radcliffe, the very engaging Dominican preacher, recalls the story of the mother who shouts up to her son to tell him that it is time for Church. *I don’t want to go,* he says, *its boring and I’m comfortable in bed.* Back comes the reply: *But you have to go, you are the bishop!***

**And on top of that there are the other usual gripes: I don’t know people, there is always someone complaining about something, there are jobs to be done – and they want my money too! Even for the most dedicated, we know there are plenty of reasons to avoid what can be a hard choice: going regularly to Church.**

**Why does it need to be hard?**

**St Paul compares the Christian life to a subscription to Virginactive – or whichever gym you favour! If you want to feel fit, alive and full of energy, you have to train for it. It’s all there in the blurb:** *Lunge, lift, squat and bend with our unique functional training zone – The Grid. Let our expert trainers guide you through an intense thirty minutes of core movements that’ll prove you really are tougher than you think.*

**How does it feel after week one? Painful? Hard work with an awful feeling that you aren’t ever going to make any progress? Better by week 2? Not much! But by week 22 what has happened? Little by little, almost without noticing, the training regime becomes familiar and you notice that the exercises get a bit easier. The panting isn’t quite so fast and furious and you are beginning to feel better. And if there was ever a temptation to miss a week or two, or three, the cost of the subscription is enough to drive you back into your shorts again!**

**And that is just to get yourself a better body!**

**On Tuesday I am back into school to talk to a group of Year 3s about what difference faith makes. And I am going to tell them about a little old lady whose name I can’t even now remember. Why? Because when I was about five or six I, and a few other children from my Cambridgeshire village, would end up in her tiny caravan listening to her tell stories about her life. And most of those stores were about her work in China during the Japanese invasions in the 1930s. Like the much more famous Gladys Aylward, she had care of literally hundreds of children who were forced to flee from the advancing Japanese. Strafed from the air, endlessly tired and desperately in need of food, shelter and medication, this tiny English missionary woman and her female companions managed to keep that long line of children safe as they crossed several hundred miles of mountains to safety.**

**It was an amazing story, full of terribly challenging situations. But what shone out – even to us children - was her amazing faith and fortitude as she got those children through successfully.**

**And those stories changed my life - way before I ever got involved in Church and later on, in Church music. My religious formation started the other way round. What I was being introduced to was not the wonder of worship at that point, but what worship and faith had done in someone’s life that enabled them to love those children so much that she was prepared to lead them – ‘Sound of Music’ like – away from danger, over the hills to a place of safety.**

**Like Abraham and Sarah in our first reading, she had no guarantee that she would make it. As we read in Genesis, Abraham was ninety-nine when God promised him a family – and by a woman he long thought incapable of having children*! He did not weaken in faith when he considered his own body, which was already as good as dead or when he considered the barrenness of Sarah’***

**What kept these extraordinary people going was not evidence but faith that God would bring about the right conclusion.**

**And it is that ‘germ of faith’, first planted all those years ago, that I am still working on – although not with weights or treadmills or push-ups! It is the exercise of my faith that leads me into Church where, just like the gym, the infinitesimally slow improvements in my confidence are nurtured, shaped and allowed to grow.**

**Which, by extension, takes me back to the Cross. Because what Jesus showed even more clearly than Abraham and Sarah, was that he too had no guarantee that his ministry would succeed – or that his disciples would ever get the message. As he tramped up the hill to suffer a death of unbelievable squalor and pain, what shone out was his faithful obedience to the will of God. Only by his dying could we, you and I, be able to escape from our preoccupation with ourselves - with all our bouts of despair and hopelessness - into a new way of living.**

**What he did was extraordinarily hard. And the only way to share in the life-giving faith that drove Jesus, is to take up the training regime that gives us, slowly but surely, not a physical physique for the front cover of a monthly magazine but a spiritual body driven by faith that is strong enough not to be knocked off course at the first sign of a crisis.**

**Like my ancient China based missionary.**

**As many of you know, there is nothing like a good film and I want to finish with a recommendation that you go and see *Phantom Thread* if you get the chance. Not just because it is the last film made by Daniel Day-Lewis, or because of the outstanding performances by Vicki Krieps and Lesley Manville but because at the heart of the story is a parable: of how suffering brings a person back to who they are really meant to be. You might not eat mushrooms for a while but the message is unmistakable!**

**In the drama of our weekly Mass, difficult though bits of it may be, we are shown a vision of the greater good – the company of saints and angels who worship with us in heaven, the will of God, the triumph of goodness over sin and death – all given to those who are willing to go through the discipline of facing the hard bits, head on.**

**It is thanks to my little missionary lady, telling stories about her experiences in China to children on wet Sunday afternoons, that I got the message and it is this: that the life of faith, the life of regular Church-going, may be hard going at times but, ultimately, it is the training we need to enable us to wait for God to reveal his plans for us – both here and in the wider world. It is that ‘harder, narrower way’ that enables us to trust (in the words of Julian of Norwich) that *all shall be well, and all manner of things shall be well.***