

## **SERMON FOR TRINITY 3 | 17.06.18**

**Of all the things that have been going on this week – and as usual there has been lots - it is one short conversation that has made sense of all the rest.**

**While St James' has been awash with absolutely sensational music in this week of Prom concerts; while we have watched Chairman Kim and President Trump conclude some kind of agreement in Singapore, we as a nation have been drawn back to the towering inferno which was the Grenfell Tragedy of a year ago and we will be staging our own moment of silence for that commemoration a little later.**

**But the conversation was with a young twenty-something who was reflecting after several years in middle management in a major charity, about whether this was something they wanted to do for ever. Without any degree of self-pity they talked about the pressures of trying to keep the organisation afloat when senior management seemed not to grasp the complexities and more junior members of staff were reluctant to be as committed to the work as they were. *People can be so disappointing – and hard work!***

**I suspect there aren't many sermons about management and yet a whole load of us are caught up in it, one way or another. Bishop Michael Curry has been back in the news this week as the tabloids have invited clergy the world over to copy his style of preaching in their sermons. And what is Michael's maxim? *Being a Christian is not essentially about joining a church or being a nice person, but about following in the footsteps of Jesus, taking his teachings seriously ...* Or, in the opening words of his sermon for Harry and Megan: *love is stronger than death and nothing can overwhelm it.***

**It is not surprising that, one year on after Grenfell, it is the managers responsible for the tower block that have most got it in the neck. Their lack of rigour was largely the cause for the cosmetic cladding that wrapped Grenfell Tower in the most flammable material possible. In itself that is a terrible symbol: *let's not address the core issues that a building like that requires – safety doors that work and sprinklers that give people time to escape down the only staircase. Let's pretty it all up and make the community lodged there feel better.***

**And yet that is too simplistic and unfair too. None of the middle and lower ranking Council workers were experts in fire control and certainly many of them were overworked, underpaid - and cared deeply for the residents who lived there. Their bosses in Kensington Town Hall may never have stepped foot over the threshold of Grenfell but you can bet your bottom dollar that many of those staff will have tramped up and down those stairs time and time again when the lifts weren't working, trying, in a money capped situation, to do their best.**

**Recent research has shown that, in relatively affluent western societies, there is a major change. Ever since the second world war, the average life expectancy has been rising. We have come to expect that people will live to a ripe old age and that is the reason why the pension age is rising and the budget for the NHS is even more squeezed. The shock is, that rise has now stopped and people are dying younger. And of what? According to Richard Wilkinson and Kate Pickett, they are dying of hopelessness.**

**And heartlessness.**

**It is the situation when those middle managers, despite their desire to help the vulnerable, find that 'the rules' simply do not allow it. Just look at the unfair mess thrown up by 'universal benefit'; listen to those in Pack-Up who tell story after story about the way their meagre allowances are being hacked back. Listen to Dave who has been waiting for months for his disabled granddaughter to get any support the moment she passed from child to adult. We live with 'the computer says no', and we wonder why humanity has been left out of decision making.**

**And the likes of Michael Curry – and Justin our own archbishop – are there to say: *Pursuing the Common Good is a Christian obligation*. It is something that William Temple, that great Archbishop who died tragically young in 1943, reminded us: *The State must have a human face*.**

**Jesus said, 'With what can we compare the kingdom of God, or what parable will we use for it? It is like a mustard seed which, when it is sown in the ground, is the smallest of all the seeds on earth; yet when it grows up, it becomes the greatest of all shrubs and puts forth large branches so that the birds of the air can make nests in its shade...'**

**As always, Jesus cuts to the chase: he does not talk about structures and targets and socio-economic benefits. He talks about what happens when you take even the smallest steps with the right materials and in the right environment.**

**The trouble with our so called meritocratic society is that there is a growing tendency to assume that people are poor because they have not made enough effort to get themselves out of their situation. For thirty years or more we have been telling people that their future lay in their own hands and they should not expect other people to bale them out. Life is about income and status and education and the care of those most close to you.**

**Is it any wonder that people are dying of hopelessness? *What am I here for? Does nobody care?***

**The extraordinary thing about Grenfell has been the response of equally poor people who have rallied round and forged a new sense of community. Before the politicians had got their act together, neighbourhood groups, churches and mosques were offering what had been needed in West Kensington for years: a sense of belonging to a community. It wasn't *the computer says no*; there wasn't a computer in sight, just hope and extraordinary caring – in the form of food, nappies and loving conversations.**

**And what has that produced? A new sense of coherence and well-being, the feeling that at last people knew what was happening to them. In a word: respect for people as people.**

**And that is why we need good managers – and we need to give them the tools that can allow them to show a sense of humanity so that, despite their better judgement, they don't have to simply say, *the computer says no*. I cannot imagine the heart-ache that must have overwhelmed the bureaucrat who had to deny Billy Caldwell the cocaine based drugs that would control his epilepsy.**

**The mustard seed is not some impossible injection of money or the overhaul of complex administrative systems. It is the appeal to build a society where we are in touch with our fellow citizens as they really are, helping one another to flourish together – rather than seeing people as economic units which unfairly favours some rather than others.**

**Of course, despite all that, management is tough. Someone has to make decisions and, to use the cliché, you can never please all the people all the time – or even, any of the people any of the time!**

**But my hope is that that people with vision and energy – and most of all those with the ability and social skills to make people feel good about themselves – will not be crushed by the system and feel they have no contribution to make.**

**Or worst still, can never achieve what they set out to change.**

**What our faith encourages us to hold on to, as the great French philosopher Blaise Pascal once wrote, is *that the heart has its reasons too.***

**The mustard seed may seem too small; our efforts and resources too fragile. *Yet when it is sown it grows up and becomes the greatest of all shrubs, and puts forth great branches so that the birds of the air can make nests in its shade.* Just look at the Grenfell community.**

**Or in the words of Michael Curry: *Being a Christian is not essentially about joining a church or being a nice person, but about following in the footsteps of Jesus, taking his teachings seriously ...***

**We blithely talk in Church about vocations. Perhaps ‘management’ should also be one of them?**