

## **SERMON FOR TRINITY II | 23.08.2020**

Jeremiah 29: 11-14; Romans 12: 1-8; St Matthew 16: 13-20

**What is August for? For lots of people it is for going away – although this year that has been a good deal more difficult than in any other year we can remember. No one wants to get caught up with quarantine regulations if they can help it.**

**For many still in Islington, August is a mix of catching up with jobs that get squeezed out when life is busier – fixing things, filing papers - and reading...**

**I mentioned last week that I had read a powerful book while I was away by Edna O'Brien, about the girls abducted by militants in Nigeria, and how she manages to make you feel that you are in those forests and are sharing the extreme dangers they faced. Rowan Williams, the former Archbishop of Canterbury talks about how our reading helps us to move into a different landscape, inhabiting a new world with new relationships and new horizons. *As a result, he says, you see differently, you sense differently and you relate differently.***

**It was St Ignatius in the 16<sup>th</sup> century who encouraged his students to read the Bible stories in that kind of way: to close their eyes and to imagine what it would have been like 'to be there, at that moment'. Taking today's Gospel for example, what would it have been like for Jesus to stop the disciples somewhere in the busy port city of Caesarea Philippi after a really busy missionary journey around the Lake of Galilee, look them straight in the eye and ask *After all we have been through, who do people say that I am* and then the bigger question still: *and who do you think that I am?***

**I say, *after all this*, because the lead-up to this momentary pause in the frenetic ministry of Jesus had been really intense: his cousin John has just been beheaded by Herod, Jesus had fed two huge crowds, one of 4000 and the other with over 5000 people; he had continued to heal the sick including a strange Canaanite woman - and the Scribes and the Pharisees had been endlessly at his heels demanding answers to their questions - and, most recently, expecting a miracle to prove his claim that he was God's Son.**

**Jesus' great gift to the disciples in that intense three-year training period was that the Twelve got to really know him, and he got to know them. In Rowan Williams' terms, they had 'pitched their tent' in his new landscape and they had committed themselves to exploring all that he had to offer. In a sense what he had to say was less important than the building of that essential bond between them. They weren't just fobbed off with a two-dimensional, surface version of Jesus, a few easily remembered bits of wisdom here and there. They could see and feel his personality - and with it all the complexity and all the possibilities that his teaching (and life-style) had to offer them.**

**And as a result of all that they could say with real confidence – we know this man. We know that what he is saying is true, that his words show us the mind of God and that his Spirit transforms lives.**

**So - what if we take St Ignatius seriously and do as he suggests: imagining Jesus coming up to us and asking us that same question, *who do you think I am?***

**Most of us have been members of the Church for many years; we have come to Mass and heard the cycle of Scripture readings many times over. We have accepted his invitation to share, in sacramental form, his body and his blood. From the Gospels we have visualised his gentle but firm prodding of his closest friends.**

**But we might have found Peter's response a bit over-elaborate. Somehow I suspect words like *You are the Messiah* are not part of our usual vocabulary and would not be the first words on our lips! So where might we go for the right phrase? Would we go to the hymn book and use some of the phrases from there: *Jesus, priceless treasure / Jesus, the joy of loving hearts / Jesus, good above all other / Jesus, Prince and Saviour...* Or - would we turn to simpler prayers and address him as Friend or as Lord? It's hard, isn't it?!**

**Because in the religious life we often find that normal words don't really convey what we are feeling. In the presence of Jesus, 'saying' anything very useful is really rather difficult and we are reduced to something else – a kind of silent enjoyment of his company, a sense of his love, his acceptance, peace and joy. These are the sensations that come across first: and for the rest, if you are anything like me, you are often quite literally 'lost for words'.**

**And Jesus understands that only too well. Indeed he reminds us not to go gabbling on like the Pharisees at the street corners, trying to impress everyone else with the number of words they can get into their prayers. Sometimes the closest relationships are almost entirely silent. Not empty, just not full of words.**

**As we prepare for yet another First Communion programme starting in September, my hope is that our young people will begin to learn this Ignatian technique of Bible study so that they become immersed in the Bible narrative just as they would lose themselves in the very best of contemporary stories or what they watch on video.**

**And as a result we hope that will set off a string of God-inspired thoughts that will help them to see *things differently, sense things differently and relate to others differently.***

**As August turns to September and summer into autumn we recall how we have all had to adjust to the effects of the pandemic in so many different ways. It has been really hard for everyone and we are not through it yet.**

**So, with just a bit more time on our hands, my prayer is that we continue to encourage each other to explore the Bible story in all its diversity, seeing how it is through the pages of Scripture that God widens our experiences and shows us things that we would never discover in any other place.**

**Even if we can't spell out exactly what Jesus means to us in the way St Peter managed to do, may we know the real presence of Jesus in every moment of every day. If all we can do is to say, out loud, *Thank you, Lord,* that may have to be enough – at least for now.**