

## **SERMON FOR TRINITY 12 | 30.08.2020**

Jeremiah 15: 15-21; Romans 12: 9-end; St Matthew 16: 21-end

**This past week a student from Oak Hill Theological College came and spent the day with us. Joe has just finished his first year and was looking to widen his experience of today's Church. The subject we were looking at was *'what is a parish?'* Which was another way of asking: *what are our primary concerns at St James' as we try to live out our Christian life?***

**In advance, and with some trepidation, I gave Joe a number of things to read – the *Weekly News'* over the last three years and access to the sermons and *Arena* newsheets to be found on the website. And I asked him to tell me what themes – probably subconsciously – emerged from what he found there. After all none of those are like books, worked out well in advance; they are reflections of what is happening at any one moment.**

**His feedback was typically generous and thoughtful: as he read through the papers, the theme that seemed to be most pressing was *'our priority is to make this Church building a welcoming sign of faith in a busy and materialist age'*. Was that intentional?**

**And if I am honest, I would have to say, yes. And I might well point to these verses from St Paul to the Romans as the way we try to do that: *care for one another in love, honour one another; share with those in need and practice hospitality*. I might also want to add that we try to make faith relevant in a secular environment: *do not lag in zeal, be generous in spirit, full of hope and faithful in prayer*. We might also say we are striving to stand for ideals which are Christ-like: *Live in harmony with all people, do not repay evil for evil; and if your enemies are hungry, give them something to eat*. If we had to lay out our ideals, these are probably what we would want to aspire to.**

**But – and this where the sheen might begin to come off our rather comfortable self-image – were we also willing to go to the next stage, as shown in St Matthew's Gospel story about Jesus and Peter? Last week, if you remember, Peter was saying all the right things to Jesus: *you are the Christ, the Messiah, the Son of God*. This week, he just gets it wrong. As soon as Jesus talks about the path of suffering he was about to take to Jerusalem, Peter is up in arms: *God forbid, Lord that any of that should ever happen to you...***

Hilary Mantel's trilogy on the life of Thomas Cromwell led me, this month, to pick up an absolutely gripping book by Peter Marshall: *Heretics and believers, a history of the English Reformation*. It's a real tour de force, expertly drawing us beyond the big names - although they are there - and into the lives of the 'little people' faced with the extraordinary changes in religious life, especially in the 1530s. Against the backdrop of Anne Boleyn's failure to give Henry VIII a son, the dissolution of monasteries great and small and the import of new ideas from Germany and Switzerland, there is the terrifying challenge of the king's agents with their endless question, *are you for the King or against him?*

And for those who, for whatever reason, were unable to acquiesce to the demand to swear allegiance to Henry VIII as Head of the Church there was an ugly truth. Conscience was not a private matter but a public one and refusal to accept his claims had one certain consequence: at best beheading, at worst, burning at the stake.

What hits you so forcibly, whether among Catholics or Protestants, among bishops or barely literate servants, was their determination not to give up their firmly held beliefs - however dire the consequences. Whatever their motivation, however right or however wrong, these words of Jesus somehow enabled them to face the worst that men could do: *If anyone would come after me, they must deny themselves, take up their cross and follow me*. The future, they believed, depended on their fortitude now.

John Bunyan, the son of an itinerant tinker, who was incarcerated for 12 years in Bedford jail from 1660 (the year of the restoration of King Charles II) for being an unlicensed preacher, is widely commemorated throughout the Anglican Communion today. We know him best for *Pilgrim's Progress* but that was only one of his 58 books and all of them deal with the same challenge: *what good will it be for someone to gain the whole world, yet forfeit their soul? What can any of us give in exchange for their soul?*

That is what Jesus had to say to Peter. However well meant, Peter's commitment to building the kingdom of God would only go so far: and it wouldn't involve suffering and it certainly wouldn't involve death. We rarely hear Jesus so angry: *Get behind me Satan*, he bawls at his closest friend.

**Christian, the hero of *Pilgrim's Progress*, has no notion of what his journey will entail either and he certainly wasn't looking for trouble if he could help it. But trouble a plenty comes to meet him – in the slough of despond, among the temptations of Vanity Fair, in his own weaknesses and in the weaknesses of those who travelled with him. And it is only through his praying for grace that he summons up the courage to journey on.**

**And in the face of the antagonistic stares of Cromwell's anti-heresy agents, in the company of Lord Hate-good, Mr Wordly Wiseman or Giant Despair in *Pilgrim's Progress* or indeed when facing the question posed directly by Jesus himself, it is all one and the same: *How much are we prepared to suffer for what we believe? Would we stand firm when challenged or would we simply turn our backs and walk the other way?***

**For however strong the symbolism of St James' Church as the permanent mark of the Kingdom of God in this parish, it has no power and no influence whatever unless those who belong to it, those who value what it stands for and the truths it preaches, are willing to underpin its ministry by real sacrifices, made on its behalf - in whatever form it takes: *overcoming evil with good, being patient in the face of affliction, never repaying evil for evil, sharing with those in need...***

**It's good, every now and then, to have someone come and tell you how you come across and what your priorities appear to be. But I think we know this one: that, by and large, we at St James' are incredibly lucky to have all we enjoy here - without us really breaking into a sweat to make it happen. There may be little inconveniences here or there – and things may not be quite as we would like but overall the call to take up our cross hasn't been heard here yet.**

**But as Joe and I reflected on the coming 20 years for parishes like this, I think we saw the writing on the wall. Because the challenge will not be about the content and quality of our personal faith as much as: *do I value this faith enough to want to share it with others? Am I doing enough to ensure the future of the Church here?***

**That is our Cross.**