**SERMON FOR TRINITY 4 | 27.06.21**

**Genesis 3: 17-19, 22-24; 1 Corinthians 11: 17-22, 33-34; St Luke 9: 46-48**

**Lots and lots of good things have happened here in St James’ again this week – but if I wanted to pick out one it would be what happened between 9-10am last Friday morning. It was when, by arrangement, Adam Atkinson the Archdeacon of Charing Cross called by.**

**Now I don’t know him terribly well; his responsibilities really lie in the Two Cities area of the Diocese but for various reasons he has been covering in Stepney too and he kindly sat in on our zoom Consistory Court case on the organ in March. And the lovely thing that be brought with him as a senior Diocesan official was not a sheaf of papers on a clip board (though he did have a notebook!) but a broad smile and the great art of encouragement. Visiting the Church for the first time he gently asked the right questions that allowed the story of this place to be told. Although he had done his homework and clearly knew most of the background, his whole focus was to explore what God was doing now in this place.**

**And then, just as our conversation was coming to an end. an Italian grandfather brought two of his grandchildren into Church. He was covering for his daughter Veronica whom I had met just a couple of times who was at work. Just as Adam was unfolding his bike to leave, the children dived for all the toys they love to play with here – the fuzzy felt in one of the drawers, the colouring pencils and the dolls house - while their grandad talked about the importance of seeing the Via Crucis (the Stations of the Cross) on the walls…**

**Today we are given the opportunity, at the 10am Mass, of re-licensing our two Churchwardens, elected annually at the AGM to serve the parish as custodians of the building and all that belongs to it. And if you go onto the Diocesan website it has a great list of all the responsibilities of this ancient office, their role as the Bishop’s ears and eyes and the many tasks that fall to them to make sure that the Church functions as it should and we don’t lose track of valuables.**

**But I bet most of you have never noticed the signs of their office as you come into Church! Because there at the end of the back row are two sticks, wands, staves. One has a mitre on the top and the other a crown. And on ceremonial occasions like when the bishop comes (at least in other parishes - it isn’t our style here), the Churchwardens will carry these wands in their hands as a sign of their ‘authority’. After all, those staves were originally pretty thick and were designed to help the Churchwardens keep order if ever things got physically out of hand – as of course history tells us they occasionally have!**

**But a stick! In a Church? As a sign of authority…**

**Which is what I want to explore for a few minutes with you now. Authority. Power. Where does it lie today?**

**In tatters, apparently if you have been following the story of Matt Hancock. For all his possession of a great Ministry (and with his royal seal to hand); for all his standing at the podium – in 10 Downing Street**

**and elsewhere – telling us about the need for social distancing and how he was doing his best to stem the Covid pandemic, a well- positioned webcam in his ministerial office provided enough video footage for the Sun newspaper to sweep any vestige of authority. The public were simply not prepared to accept the hypocrisy of a minister who lectured others about what to do when he was only too willing to disregard those rules himself.**

**Of course it was not always like that; for previous generations (and in far too many countries even today) tyrannical governments still use their authority to impose laws irrespective of the needs of the people - or the moral standing of those in power: Russia, Myanmar, Iran are just three awful examples. *Do as I say not do as I do.***

**And when we explore the Scriptures there are plenty of examples of God behaving in a very similar manner: our first reading being just one example. Adam and Eve have been tempted to eat from the Tree of Knowledge – and there is to be no reconciliation and no going back. The punishment couldn’t be clearer: no more freebies! Everything you are engaged in, from food production to the birth of your children, will be hard work and it will be painful.**

**And that view of authority and the exercise of power is strongly felt by many of us for quite a lot of the time. Trespass against the rules and suffer the consequences: attempt to drive through the new barriers on Prebend Street in our so-called People Friendly streets and the penalty charge will be with you very shortly! And even in the Church we are conditioned to be deferential to people with big hats and coloured clothes – at least until they are found wanting in a Hancock kind of way.**

**But is that kind of authority, what we might think of as external regulation – the way of Christ? Was he into coercion?**

**We can almost literally hear the pips squeaking in our second reading where we listen to St Paul talking to the divided and class ridden Church in Corinth. As well as the usual arguments about who was to do what, even when they were sharing Communion together it was one law for the rich and another for the poor.**

**And St Paul’s reaction? Not to wade in with a big stick but to appeal to people’s better instincts – not *external* authority but the harder but ultimately more God-inspired method of *internal* authority: doing what is right simply because … we know it is right! We don’t just look after ourselves or brow beat others because we think we have the right answer. Our ministry is about guarding, cherishing and encouraging the gifts given by God to each and everyone, irrespective of their status - or whether they deserve it or not.**

**Stephen Cottrell, the new Archbishop of York, has written a typically short but challenging book on ministry in which, time and time again, he points out that authority is not about imposing our will on other people but about sharing the gifts we have been given with those around us. He invites us, in the words of Psalm 1, to be like trees planted in water - simply overflowing with energy and love as a consequence.**

**And the way we do that is so often in the little things: not being obsessed with what we think needs to be done but by noticing and giving time to the small things that other people value; never taking what we have for granted but living like welcome guests in the family of the Church, and enabling everyone to feel that same welcome.**

**If ministry is about responding to the call of God to know him and to serve others (because, after all, ministry is God’s not ours) then, as we commission – with huge thanks – Isabel and Hilary as they offer themselves for a further year in the Office of Churchwarden, we continue to share today’s Gospel reading as our inspiration and guide.**

**There is Jesus with all the frustrations and temptations to try to do more and more, for even more and more people: and what does he do? He places a child in front of the crowd and says: *whoever welcomes a child like this in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me.***

**Guarding, cherishing and above all, encouraging.**

**No big sticks. No standing on ceremony. No going through the motions just because that is what others expect. Transparently, honestly, showing who we are and who we serve, our ministry at every level is, in the words of Rowan Williams, *to be a sign of our willingness to offer a glimpse of heaven, here in this place.***

**May God bless our Churchwardens and all of us serving alongside them at St James’. And may we be open to those golden moments of encouragement - whenever they come – even at 9am on a Friday morning!**