

## **SERMON FOR LAST AFTER TRINITY 2023 | 29.10.23**

Leviticus 1: 1-2, 15-18; 1 Thessalonians 2: 1-8; St Matthew 22: 34-46

In some parishes the focus for today's sermon will be the Bible – it is sometimes called Bible Sunday – the day when congregations are encouraged to give thanks for all that we read in the pages of Scripture. Looking back I recall how, over the years, we too have tried to bring the Bible alive, spending time drawing comparisons between the Old Testament and the new Testament view of God, looking at the great OT figures like Abraham, Moses, Elijah, raiding the Book of Acts for inspiration about how we might discover how to live like Jesus in the 20<sup>th</sup> century – our current strap line - and generally discovering how relevant and inspirational the Bible continues to be.

For an hour on Thursday evening Mo, Ethan and I sat in Church – against the background of some noisy children playing with the toys in the south aisle, trying to respond to this question: *if Jesus walked into St James' right now, what kind of person do we think he would be like? How would we feel in his presence; what would we want to talk to him about?*

And, naturally, that made us remember many of the biblical stories when Jesus had turned up in people's lives, unannounced: we thought of that time when he stayed behind in Jerusalem when he was eleven or twelve years old, barging into the discussions of the heavyweight rabbis and teachers – and talking with such confidence and maturity that they were forced to listen to him rather than tell him to go away and play outside.

We thought of the scores of times he met people who were sick or in trouble – like the man who couldn't get into the pool quickly enough to be healed, or the woman who touched his robe in the street, or the Roman centurion with a dying child or the ten lepers who were miraculously healed – each life transformed by the chance meeting.

In a sense these are the easy stories, the tales that remind us that Jesus' constant desire was to help people to become whole – able to see, able to be free of pain, able to walk, able to return to their homes. This is the Jesus of our hopes and dreams, the one who can change events for the better and, in so doing, make us not just whole and complete, but also holy – those who know their need of God and who allow themselves to be moulded and changed by his love. If Jesus walked into our Church right now, how wonderful it would be to meet the one who has such ability! How warm and comforting it would be...

**But I suspect that, as in so many other stories, meeting with Jesus would be a bit more testing. Remember the rich young man who comes up to him, telling of how he keeps the Law and does all the right things required of a good Jewish boy. And yet, without raising his voice or doing anything in the least bit hurtful or offensive, Jesus sees through all this self-justification and, without telling him that he is wrong, invites him to sell all his worldly goods and take the risk of following him. It isn't just the dreadful thought of being poor that is so devastating, it is the fact that Jesus has weighed up this person in an instant and got right to the heart of why he still felt unhappy and unsatisfied. Jesus knows each of us as we really are, not the version that we would like to show him.**

**So - kind, healing, caring – demanding nothing in return. And also the perceptive teacher, seeing into our hearts and revealing what we are really like. But then, alongside those things, as in today's Gospel, the kind of person who can cope with the endless barbed comments of those vexatious Pharisees, prodding, testing, trying to catch him out – as in last week's Gospel about paying tax to Caesar.**

**Would we be comfortable as we stood alongside Jesus, watching him deal with these people? Would we relate positively to his kind teaching, the leader who didn't try to dominate people or try to put them down? Doesn't he, actually, appear to be rather weak in the face of hostility?**

**We all remember the teachers at school we were terrified of, as well as those we could get round when we needed to. Who did we work harder for or obey more readily? Sadly, often the bullies and the most unpleasant. If Jesus were here, would we wonder why he didn't put his hearers straight with more authority? If he were here, might we not also challenge him because he wouldn't frighten us, belittle us or pull rank?**

**What kind of person is this Jesus who comes here and stands alongside us?**

**What St Matthew is trying to do in this story is to make us think about our expectations of Jesus, the Son of God. Who is he, and what is he? Matthew points us to Psalm 110 to tease out what kind of person we are expecting when we think of the Messiah. After all, in Jewish tradition this is the person on whom all hope is pinned.**

**Never mind the savagery of the Romans or the guile of the Chief Priests, the Messiah, the Son of Man, would one day come in glory and all would be set right at last. However terrible things were right now, all they had to do was to hold on until God's agent would come and sweep all the corruption away.**

**But then we find that Jesus isn't willing to play this traditional role of the Messiah either. Yes the Messiah is the anointed descendant of King David, the warrior King; yes he is also equal with God the Father and entitled to be called 'my Lord'. But in the way he would behave and teach and heal, would he a fighter or a divine being? Absolutely not.**

**Instead we are invited to look, not at Psalm 110, but at that famous passage from the prophet Isaiah when the Messiah is described as a servant, one who is prepared to give up all rank and status and dignity and to become one just like us. Indeed in Isaiah he is called the Suffering Servant, modest to the point of insignificance, one willing to endure pain and rejection - for us.**

**This Messiah, this Jesus, genuinely loves and cares; he really does understand us from the inside out – but he will not allow himself to be placed on some kind of artificial pedestal because we want to keep him at a distance. He wants to be where we are – making us whole, making us holy.**

**Of course the irony is that we rather like being in charge; we warm to people praising us and telling us how good we are; we are quick to make judgements about people – to make remarks which are often based on prejudice rather than real facts... We like to feel we know best!**

**This meditation started with a 'what if...': what if Jesus came into our Church to be with us here today?**

**But of course the truth is we are meeting him - all the time. We are meeting him in each other, we are meeting him in our prayers and we are meeting him whenever we face a series of dilemmas and have to make decisions. When someone in need looks at us and we dismiss them as not being worth bothering with; when we are asked to give generously and forgive warmly – that person we are relating to is Jesus. It is Jesus I am snapping at, Jesus whom I am being rude to, Jesus who I am not supporting, Jesus who I am arrogantly and selfishly 'putting straight'.**

**As I look at the TV reports about Gaza, as I read about Bishop Rolando Alvarez, serving a 26year prison sentence for refusing to leave Nicaragua under the dictatorship of President Daniel Ortega, when I am running out of energy and am full of doubt, then I have to learn to put all my hope and trust in Jesus - who I know is there, not just with me but with all those who are suffering. This is the Jesus who calls us to do all in our power to be in solidarity with each other, especially those who feel alone.**

**Jesus IS Lord. He IS King of the Universe, Lord of Lords and King of Kings.**

**But he is also closer to me than my own breath. Without him I cannot cope with all that life throws at me; in his company I am a different person and I can rest in the sure knowledge that, though he knows all my weaknesses and all my sins, he is still willing to walk with me and, one day, draw me into his heaven.**

**We get so easily carried away by one concern or another. What does the future hold? So much is uncertain and people can be so fickle.**

**None of us are immune from feeling abandoned and uncared for. But this Bible passage, today's Gospel story, puts it all into context: *You shall love the Lord with all your heart, with all your soul and with all your mind. And in the same way you shall love your neighbour as much as you love yourself.***

**I will go on loving, and working, and forgiving - because I know that God loves me. And I can do it, because of the strength that he gives me.**

**That's what the Bible so powerfully tells me.**