

SERMON FOR CHRIST THE KING at 5pm | 26.11.2023

Isaiah 40: 27-31; 2 Corinthians 12: 7-10; St Matthew 25: 31-40

In the Vicarage garden stands a massive London plane tree which, at this time of the year, sheds a big black plastic bag full almost every day. So before anyone else has stirred I have been out there, rake in hand, trying to work out what to say this afternoon. In a sense I have said everything already: four Masses a week for nearly fifteen years is a lot of words and I nearly copped out by sharing some of the thousands of photographs I have taken instead. Looking back over the pictures at breakneck speed this morning I simply didn't have enough space on my note pad for all the things that have happened here: like the world around us, the Church doesn't look or feel the same as it did in 2009 and it doesn't work in the same way either. But there, somehow, God has been at work.

People have been kind enough to look around the Church building and perhaps the glittering gold pipes of the rebuilt organ and describe it as the legacy that we are leaving behind. That's really generous and I am hugely grateful for the way St James' parish has risen to the challenge of making this wonderful Church fit for purpose in the 21st century. Apart from all our services the place is constantly in use, hosting everything from top quality music concerts to Alcoholics Anonymous Conventions, a stop-over for charity night walks, a new venue for art exhibitions and a film set for a Four Weddings and a Funeral spoof for Red Nose Day. We might not be on the beaten track but the place is never empty. But all that is mostly about having a vision of what could be achieved - and working hard to pull it off.

No the things that have really touched me have been all the enquiries: those adults asking about Baptism – for themselves or for their children, First Holy Communions, Confirmations, Wedding and Funerals. Nearly all of these have been very personal occasions where wonderful friendships have been made. Watching our Church children playing with water pistols or on the bouncy castle in the Vicarage garden have been all recalled recently in emails from Singapore and Illinois, Paris and so many places in the UK. Sadly the churn of people is endless and this is how the Church has to operate in our inner cities. That people have taken away good memories from St James' wherever they have gone is hugely encouraging.

And that is what I have wanted to share most of all: encouragement. There are all too many institutions and far too many people who want us to be like them, to conform to their standards and their ways of doing things. Martin Percy, in a great little book called 'The Humble Church, building the Body of Christ', repeatedly asks the question: what is different about a good Church?

And the answer has to be that it does its best to mirror the ability of Jesus to take people where they are, to accept their foibles and their hangups, and to make them feel welcome – whatever their circumstances, whatever their age, their race, their sexual preferences or their politics.

Which is why I have chosen the first two readings tonight, passages from the Bible which have been read at almost every major event I have been involved in over these last forty years. In the first Isaiah begins by taking seriously the fact that most of us wonder just what God is up to and why he seems such a long way away when we need him most? So he lays it on the line: God is still the creator God, but he leaves us freedom to make the very best of all that he has given us - knowing that we will soon get tired and fed up: undeniably life can be tough. If I had a £1 for every pub conversation I have had with people wanting to know why God allows bad things to happen I wouldn't be spending my time looking for a large mortgage for whatever house we hope to buy in the next three months! Isaiah then goes on to say that of course we will get disheartened and over tired when we try to work these things out for ourselves. So he invites us to rely on God's strength instead. *Those who wait on the Lord shall renew their strength. They shall rise up on wings like eagles; they will walk and they will not grow faint.* Do you think that any of this transformation would have been possible if this Church hadn't taken all of that on board. Of course not.

But there is another level to this kind of realism too and it is not just about stamina but about humility. Anyone in leadership needs their heads examining! You are never going to be right – and some people are going to make life very unpleasant for you indeed. It is true in all walks of life and, sadly it is true in the Church too. And so St Paul explores how we deal with this. And it is by our being willing to admit that we mess up, make mistakes, take short cuts, lose our temper – or whatever our particular fault is. However much we like to show the world our good side, the nasty bits creep out sooner or later and they can't be just swept under the carpet. But again, St Paul says, they are part of God's plan, to stop us getting big headed. Whatever we have done has not been because we are great but because we have allowed God to work inside us and as a result, much better things have happened. That too we at St James' have tried to learn: accepting – even welcoming - people's limitations and using the best they have to offer has been the way forward. That is why, on Tuesday evening, we could take photographs at our leaving party of the most amazingly diverse group possible. None of us are perfect but look what happens if we give people the benefit of the doubt and major on their gifts instead of the things we don't like.

The Feast of Christ the King may not be the most well known Christian festival but what a day to bow out: the day we put Jesus right at the centre of all we are about. But there is always a built in challenge when we come close to Jesus and the Gospel spells it out pretty neatly. In this story he lists a whole series of social challenges – no food, no clothes, no friends, no freedom - and everyone listening would have said, *yes we need to do something about each of those*. In our sermons here we have tried to think about most of the challenges of our own day from immigration to child abuse.

But Jesus stops it being just something theoretical – and therefore easily parked in a corner. He goes on to say: *but whenever you did something good - you did it to me*.

And that makes all the difference. This isn't just some homeless person we feed in Pack-Up on a Monday lunchtime or some lonely person we play music to at the Proms: this is Jesus. This is about a relationship with breathing human beings who we are to treat as if they were God.

Now of course none of this is new or that revolutionary. But it is, I hope what the Church of England is all about. We are not just looking after our own we are to go out in the streets to care for all, whatever label they would otherwise put on themselves. I fear, sometimes that we Anglicans are beginning to lose something of this vocation, preferring to jump on various bandwagons rather than attending to our core task of being Jesus' eyes and arms and feet, open to anyone who needs us.

But here, here at St James' Islington, I pray that our willingness to take risks, ignore the sceptics, the doubters and those who want us to be conventional, has made a real contribution to the building of the Kingdom of God.

Thank you for teaching me these lessons. Thank you for your patience and your ability to forgive and move on. Thank you for putting Jesus at the heart of what we are about so that he can refresh us and lead us into projects we never thought we could accomplish.

It's been an immensely busy fifteen years - but we have all learnt a huge amount along the way. Humbly we now ask God to lead us on to even better things in the future.

