

17th Sunday after Trinity Sunday 04 October 2020

We joyfully return today to holding an 'in person' service in the Benefice this Sunday 4th October. It will be a strange experience for those of us gathered in St Mary's. No hugging or handshaking, no sharing the peace – in fact no physical contact at all. No singing, no hanging around before and after the service to catch up on news, all of us in masks and of course many less gathered than usual. And yet much will remain the same – our gathering as a community of Christians, our attention to the biblical readings – perhaps the first some of us have heard or read in months, our prayers, our communion with God. The reflection below is essentially the sermon I am preaching at this first service.

Collect

Gracious God
You call us to fullness of life
Deliver us from unbelief and banish our anxieties
With the liberating love of Jesus Christ our Lord
Amen

Readings

Exodus 20: 1-4, 7-9, 12-20

Then God spoke all these words:

I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery; you shall have no other gods before me.

You shall not make for yourself an idol, whether in the form of anything that is in heaven above, or that is on the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth.

You shall not make wrongful use of the name of the Lord your God, for the Lord will not acquit anyone who misuses his name.

Remember the sabbath day and keep it holy. For six days you shall labour and do all your work.

Honour your father and your mother, so that your days may be long in the land that the Lord your God is giving you.

You shall not murder.

You shall not commit adultery.

You shall not steal.

You shall not bear false witness against your neighbour.

You shall not covet your neighbour's house; you shall not covet your neighbour's wife, or male or female slave, or ox, or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbour.

When all the people witnessed the thunder and lightning, the sound of the trumpet, and the mountain smoking, they were afraid and trembled and stood at a distance, and said to Moses, 'You speak to us, and we will listen; but do not let God speak to us, or we will die.' Moses said to the people, 'Do not be afraid; for God has come only to test you and to put the fear of him upon you so that you do not sin.'

Philippians 3: 4 - 14

If anyone else has reason to be confident in the flesh, I have more: circumcised on the eighth day, a member of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless.

Yet whatever gains I had, these I have come to regard as loss because of Christ. More than that, I regard everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and I regard them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but one that comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God based on faith. I want to know

Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death, if somehow I may attain the resurrection from the dead.

Not that I have already obtained this or have already reached the goal; but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own. Beloved, I do not consider that I have made it my own; but this one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on towards the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus.

Matthew 21: 33 - end

‘Listen to another parable. There was a landowner who planted a vineyard, put a fence around it, dug a wine press in it, and built a watchtower. Then he leased it to tenants and went to another country. When the harvest time had come, he sent his slaves to the tenants to collect his produce. But the tenants seized his slaves and beat one, killed another, and stoned another. Again he sent other slaves, more than the first; and they treated them in the same way. Finally he sent his son to them, saying, “They will respect my son.” But when the tenants saw the son, they said to themselves, “This is the heir; come, let us kill him and get his inheritance.” So they seized him, threw him out of the vineyard, and killed him. Now when the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants?’ They said to him, ‘He will put those wretches to a miserable death, and lease the vineyard to other tenants who will give him the produce at the harvest time.’

Jesus said to them, ‘Have you never read in the scriptures:

“The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone; this was the Lord’s doing, and it is amazing in our eyes”.

Therefore I tell you, the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people that produces the fruits of the kingdom. The one who falls on this stone will be broken to pieces; and it will crush anyone on whom it falls.’

When the chief priests and the Pharisees heard his parables, they realized that he was speaking about them. They wanted to arrest him, but they feared the crowds, because they regarded him as a prophet.

Reflection (as preached at St Mary’s, Radnage on 4th October 2020)

- Today is the first Sunday service in this benefice since 15th March
- A very limited number of us are able to meet thanks to those who have cared for our church during lockdown and who have studied the guidelines (an arduous task!), have planned and cleaned and set up
- We have all lived through a lot since we last gathered together and since then all of our lives have been significantly changed by lockdown, by isolation for some, by life events that have continued even while we deal with this new threat to life, health and livelihood
- The life and spread of the virus – and its effect on the lives of all, remains challenging. The future remains very uncertain and quite bleak for many who have lost their livelihoods, or been bereaved or remain ill
- It is very hard to avoid becoming anxious and afraid, particularly given that we live in age of instant and overwhelming news coverage and public commentary
- This Tuesday is the church celebration of the reformation martyr William Tyndale. He of course completed the first translation and printing of the new testament in English in the 1520’s, following on from Martin Luthers questions and impact on theological thought
- What followed was years of religious dissent; churches being closed, looted and burned. People not allowed to worship in the way they always had, people being killed for adhering to their beliefs
- This is just one example, there are many more, of the way unexpected things can spring up and cause mayhem, uncertainty, anxiety and fear in peoples lives and in the life of the church

- No-one would call the religious wars of the reformation, or any other wars a blessing – but sometimes good things come from them
- There are good things to be found even in bad times and we can be happier and healthier if we adopt the mind set of looking for them
- Similarly with all that has happened this year
- No-one is going to look back fondly on COVID 19 but some good things have happened during it's course, some of which we should try and hang on to
- Things like the resurgence in home baking and gardening, more family time, neighbours shopping for each other, respect and gratitude for 'essential' workers, talking to people more even if it is via phone or zoom, more appreciation of nature, less pollution
- No-one is happy that churches were locked and services suspended but some good things came out of that too: wide choice of services available at any time on line, more time for prayer, more focus on being kind and Christ-like, more turning to faith to sustain them through this difficult time
- Perhaps during this time we have been encouraged to think about what things are truly essential to us: hugging our family and friends, toilet paper, socialising with others, the beauty of nature, the ability to get out for a walk, our gardens, the people who kept in touch with us and supported us
- Perhaps some of us considered our faith during this time – was that essential to us, was prayer essential to us, was trying to love and support others in a Christ like way part of our lockdown life?
- Are we still so overwhelmed and anxious that we have forgotten our Lords promise to be with us always and his plea that we follow him and live in a way that puts others first?
- There are many bible quotes that talk of not being afraid or anxious because we are never alone – here are a few examples
 - Isaiah 41:10 - do not fear, for I am with you, do not be afraid, for I am your God; I will strengthen you, I will help you, I will uphold you with my victorious right hand
 - 2 Timothy 1:7 - for God did not give us a spirit of cowardice, but rather a spirit of power and of love and of self-discipline.
- In his letter Paul talks of his desire to truly know Christ, despite hardship and suffering. He stresses pressing on to the goal of truly being close to Christ in response to Christ's love for us
- And our gospel reading talks of the kingdom of God being given to those who produce the fruits of the kingdom
- It is lovely to be back with you in person here this morning. But remember we can nourish our faith, we can read and pray and love one another without our buildings, without the many trappings of the church, if we have to
- Let me finish by reminding you all of the words of today's Collect: Gracious God, You call us to fullness of life, Deliver us from unbelief and banish our anxieties, With the liberating love of Jesus Christ our Lord
- So go from here, and as best as you are able, follow that call to a fullness of life
- Amen