

Sunday Sermon

Revd Canon Charles Jenkin – 21st June 2020 – 2nd Sunday after Trinity

Jeremiah 20.7-13; Romans 6.1b-11; Matthew 10.24-39

Today's readings are about having courage, courage to do the right thing. As our country and our church moves forward into a more challenging future, this is an important message. This is not a time for faint hearts. One of the memorable quotes from Winston Churchill is, "Courage is the quality that guarantees all others." If you don't have the courage to do what is right, then many such good intentions will fail.

Against this, one might also turn to the phrase immortalised in the TV show, Yes Minister. When the government minister, as he often did, proposes something unwise, the permanent secretary would respond, "Minister, that is very courageous of you." Whereupon the said minister's confidence crumbles as he realises he has not considered the consequences. Courage can be misplaced. The point about the Churchill quote is that it is other qualities that courage guarantees. It is not an isolated quality in itself, however admirable it might be. The point is to have the courage to do the thing that is right.

So in our reading from St Paul's Letter to the Romans, Paul exhorts Christians to have the courage to change from their former ways, and not to remain merely comfortable in their knowledge of being able to be forgiven. Moreover in having the courage to change, he assures Christians that they will encounter the grace of God in the changing too, just as much as in the former forgiveness. This is an important message too. God's grace goes before us as well as behind us. *For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his. (Romans 6.5)*

Today's Gospel contains some of the harder sayings of Jesus if you take them in isolation. For example, "Whoever loves son or daughter more than me, is not worthy of me." Much damage to human families has been done by people taking this particular statement too literally, and it is a good example of how everything that Jesus says needs to be taken in the context of his overall character.

Jesus himself is the true Word of God, and anyone who pays attention to how Jesus himself really treats children, knows that it cannot mean what it literally sounds like. Jesus is not someone so obsessed with his own status that he wants people to love their children less. Actually he wants them to love them more. So what does he really mean by saying something so strange?

The whole gospel passage is about having the courage to follow the Christian way which is inevitably at variance with the ways of the world. Therefore Jesus says, yes you will face opposition in the world but do not fear. However much the world disowns you, you are eternally safe with God and deeply valued by him. And yes you will also face opposition

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within your own families and friendships, as you challenge accepted values and traditional ways. Yet the new life you find in following Jesus will far outweigh these challenges.

And the sword that Jesus refers to in verse 34, "*I have not come to bring peace, but a sword,*" is very far from having anything to do with taking military action in support of military action, or forcing people to become Christian by the sword, or threatening non-believers. Rather, this is the sword of the Word of God which cuts to the heart of issues, and that cuts to the heart of human motivations. There are many evils in human affairs that need to be challenged and exposed by the edge of this sword.

What Jesus is telling his followers is that in being Christian, nothing is more important than the values of the Kingdom of God, and that Christians are people that are learning to have the courage to make this so. Jesus is not telling people to love their families and their friends any less, but to have the courage to love himself and his values more. In this way the love of God will flow more widely and will indeed change the world, and will indeed challenge the injustices of this world.

And particularly, Jesus is telling Christians to have the courage to handle conflict in different ways to those of the world, to do it in his way, by loving your neighbour as yourself, by loving your enemy, by not retaliating, and so on. Being a Christian will inevitably bring conflict because the values of the Kingdom challenge the values of this world so deeply, but the heart of the issue is actually about how we Christians handle that conflict, and having the courage to do it in in Jesus' way.

So whether it is doing our bit to overcome the injustices of racism, inequality and deprivation, or whether it is engaging in political or moral debate, or whenever we feel personally on the defensive, or whenever we feel our personal world is being threatened, Jesus says, do not fear, have courage, go forth, you are safe with me. Amen.

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