

Sunday Sermon

Revd Canon Charles Jenkin – 2nd August 2020 – 8th Sunday after Trinity

Isaiah 55.1-5; Romans 9.1-5; Matthew 14.13-21

“When the going gets tough, the tough get going.” Apparently this motivational aphorism has been around since the 1950s, coined it is thought, by an American Football coach. That’s the sport where the players look huge because they wear thick shoulder pads to protect each other in the high speed collisions that are part of the game. It is of course a tough sport. “When the going gets tough, the tough get going.” You can also imagine a John Wayne character saying it in a movie in his characteristic drawl, but I don’t think that ever quite happened.

The saying has of course found its way into numerous motivational seminars in which people are encouraged to use setbacks to generate new energy and determination. And then there are the comic and wry take offs. When the going gets tough, the tough.... go shopping, get knitting, and the like. “Get praying” however, is neither comic nor wry, and is definitely rather more sensible, even if it doesn’t quite seem to fit the popular tough-guy image. Though it should. It definitely should. Tough times are when people need to call on all their inner resources, and prayer is definitely part of doing that.

We live in tough times, upsetting times. Quite how tough and how upsetting remains to be seen, as the country apparently hits the brakes on lockdown relaxation measures. Moreover the toughness now required of us all, is not the gung-ho physical stuff of action movies, but a mental toughness, a tough self-control, a tough alertness, that maintains important anti-coronavirus social distancing and hygiene measures, even when they seem deeply unnatural and irritating.

Of course such mental and spiritual toughness and resilience has always been at the heart of being truly physically tough as well. “When the going gets tough, the tough get going,” is actually nothing new. It’s always been true. It’s always been needed. It aptly describes the frequent human experience that in adversity, we discover new things about ourselves, about each other, and about God.

Times of adversity are times to dig deep, and those who have practised digging deep often find that that have an advantage. They find that they have been training their resilience and fortitude, and for people of faith, prayer is absolutely fundamental to this. When Christians don’t pray, Christians become weak, for praying puts us in touch with all the things that make us strong and tough and resilient.

I am not talking here about the kind of desperate prayer that implores God for help when we have run out of our own resources. That has its place of course. There is a kind of popular view that this is the only thing that prayer really is; that prayer is really only for weak and desperate people. But that would be like saying that all transport is about ambulances, fire engines and breakdown vans. They have their place, they are vitally important, but actually they are not the whole point of the transport system.

ST MARY-LE-TOWER CHURCH IPSWICH

Prayer, often, is about discovering where your strength really lies, where your toughness and resilience lies, where your ability to go on loving and giving is, where your reserves of compassion and forgiveness are. When you pray, you are stronger. And tougher.

Today's Gospel reading is partly about this. John the Baptist has gone. It's been quite a shocking setback. The needy crowds are turning more and more to Jesus. Jesus needs some me time, actually me-and-God time, me-and-Dad time. But the crowds seek him out in his retreat in the desert, thousands of them. It's a bit of a crisis. What to do?

Somehow, God sustains all of them, Jesus himself, the disciples, the crowds; and there was more than enough bread for everyone. More than enough. It's a miracle, a sign that appears directly in all four gospels, the only one to do so apart from the Resurrection. The how of the sign is not important. The point is that people vividly remembered it and they got the message.

They remembered a sign that recalled so many previous times when God was sustaining his pilgrim people through difficult times, and which gave them hope. Manna in the desert. The pot of cooking oil that never ran out. The crowd were not disappointed. They had followed Jesus into the desert, and God had provided.

This is very much a message for the Church in our day too, and perhaps particularly for St Mary-le-Tower in the challenges we face to maintain the choral ministry that so defines our church. These are tough times, in all sorts of ways. It is very much a time to pray, not so much in desperation, but to sustain things like vision and hope and love and strength and resilience and unity, and yes, toughness.

For people of faith, God is the source of these things. For followers of Jesus, his is the strength of love and wisdom that we seek. And as the Bible constantly reminds us, God is faithful, and when we are faithful too, he will provide what we need. Amen.

CJ. 02.08.20