

## TRINITY II YEAR A 2020 (Proper 7)

I distinctly remember this equivalent Sunday four years ago, because I shared with the congregation some items of good news. This news was positive, not biased or fake – just plain old good news! I do the same this morning:

- In the United States, politicians in Congress have proposed sweeping legislation to reform the police following the death of George Floyd in Minneapolis, seeking the banning of chokeholds.
- A new study, published this week, suggested that doing altruistic acts such as volunteering could help us live longer. Yes, being kind is good for you!
- Wednesday was a great day for the environment in our nation; two months without firing up any of our coal-fired power stations - the longest the country has gone coal-free since the Industrial Revolution.
- Listening to Mozart could reduce epilepsy seizures for sufferers, using Wolfgang's music as an extra supplemental therapeutic option.

So you see – there is good news around. You just have to search for it, particularly in this strange time when we continue to worry over the current situation of Covid-19. So why have I started with such a list? Well, at least in part because today's readings are difficult, the Gospel reading one of the hardest hitting in the lectionary.

But let's start with Jeremiah. He is being very Jeremiah-ish in our first reading – understandably so as he prophesies an unpopular message to try to draw people back to God, and then suffers for it. In this he sees the hand of God weighing heavily upon him. There is a strong sense throughout that Jeremiah sees God as one who tests people, even to the point of breaking them. For him and many of the Old Testament writers, God is viewed like some divine puppet master, using retribution on humanity and bringing chaos to the human state, even though Jeremiah ultimately knows true peace in the Divine One.

Many people within our Faith, as well as in other world faiths, have a sense that when trials befall them it is God's will. I don't. For me, when terrible things happen, they are generally caused by self-imposition, the actions of others or restless creation. For instance, within our human state, we fall ill because we are extraordinary wonders of nature, and things just go wrong or wear out. And whilst everything that exists is shot through with God's glory, the Divine Creator is not standing over humanity or creation pulling the strings. Creation also displays the divine freedom built into it. As to living our lives, the words 'Lead us not into temptation,' enable us to have a chance to reflect on the way we lead our own lives - 'lead us not into temptation' is a plea to ask God to strengthen us to resist temptation, not a call to stop the strings being pulled! All changes with Jesus, whose presence within our own lives causes us to view and understand our Scriptures in a new way. Through him, what we DO know is that God's love abides with us every step of our journey. As I have said before, no matter who you are or what you have done, God can't love you anymore than at this moment. So it is how we respond in acknowledging this and the way we seek to deepen our understanding and the pull of this love within our earthly pilgrimage.

In the passage we heard from Paul, he captures the sense of the unique way in which we believe ourselves to be caught up into the life of God. He talks of the importance of this new life we enter through baptism. We pass through the waters from slavery of 'self' to true freedom revealed in the self-giving love of Jesus Christ. Paul knows that his whole life is transformed through being caught up living **in** and **through** Jesus. He points out that we find our true selves in following the Lord's example of selfless love - a life-long journey. We are not made perfect in Baptism, but we start the journey of being caught up in understanding God's Love through following Jesus in the power of the Holy Spirit.

So let me turn to the Gospel reading today – perhaps part of one of the most difficult of passages from the whole of the Gospel narratives, because Jesus seems to lay out the path of discipleship in such stark terms. *Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword. For I have come to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law; and one's foes will be members of one's own household.*

This doesn't seem to be Happy Families! In fact it is a continuation of the meaning of discipleship which we heard in last week's Gospel reading, together with the cost that sometimes comes with it. This section of the Gospel is addressed to the Twelve and would have seemed very vivid to those following in their immediate footsteps. At the time when Matthew was writing, Christianity was enduring the start of state persecution by the Roman authorities. The rupture between our mother faith, Judaism, was also becoming irrevocably unrepairable, a running sore in which the Church to its shame inflicted unimaginable horrors on Jews in the name of Jesus. But many facets of this understanding the Lord gives, are still as relevant today as they were then. In our comfortable first world lives even in the current situation, words about persecution in the terms of our faith might seem somewhat irrelevant. But just think of those who **do** endure persecution and even martyrdom for the Name of Jesus – and there are millions of people in this situation every day of the week.

The first act of discipleship laid on the twelve was that of Proclamation. This is our baptismal call too. We are called to herald. Not justify, convince, persuade, or prove. We are called to proclaim what we know to be true; true about God, about Jesus, and about Creation. Our proclamation is about the unshakeable faithfulness of God for humanity; that Jesus is Lord and that Creation - all its wonders, both known and unknown - bear signs of God's indwelling. Above all, proclaiming means loving – Christians are called to love all people no matter how difficult that may seem (and sometimes we will find it very difficult indeed) – we are called to proclaim our faith in the face of ridicule or being treated as irrelevant.

So, having started this morning with good news, I want to end with even greater news. You, my dear friends, are loved by God more than you can ever imagine or understand. Let this knowledge fill your hearts and your lives – just wonder at this gift revealed through the death and resurrection of Jesus. I think that it was St Augustine who said, *'God loves each of us as if there were only one of us.'* In this knowledge may we all catch a fresh glimpse of the unimaginable fullness and richness of God's love for each of us together with the opportunity in which this can lead us to continual transformation. It matters not how flawed you may feel yourself to be – God, in his infinite love, can heal all – and in doing so,

calls us to both live and reveal Resurrection life. We should never forget that we have the greatest message of hope for humanity – What is this hope? Jesus.

Jesus, who said *'I am the Light of the world; those who follow Me will not walk in the darkness but will have the Light of life.'* There can be no greater news than this.



*Christ Pantocrator (Greek: Χριστὸς Παντοκράτωρ) – Hagia Sophia, Istanbul, 13<sup>th</sup> century*

**Jeremiah 20: 7-13**

O Lord, you have enticed me, and I was enticed; you have overpowered me, and you have prevailed. I have become a laughing-stock all day long; everyone mocks me. For whenever I speak, I must cry out, I must

shout, 'Violence and destruction!' For the word of the Lord has become for me a reproach and derision all day long. If I say, 'I will not mention him, or speak any more in his name', then within me there is something like a burning fire shut up in my bones; I am weary with holding it in, and I cannot. For I hear many whispering: 'Terror is all around! Denounce him! Let us denounce him!' All my close friends are watching for me to stumble. 'Perhaps he can be enticed, and we can prevail against him, and take our revenge on him.' But the Lord is with me like a dread warrior; therefore my persecutors will stumble, and they will not prevail. They will be greatly shamed, for they will not succeed. Their eternal dishonour will never be forgotten. O Lord of hosts, you test the righteous, you see the heart and the mind; let me see your retribution upon them, for to you I have committed my cause. Sing to the Lord; praise the Lord! For he has delivered the life of the needy from the hands of evildoers.

### **Romans 6: 1b-11**

Should we continue in sin in order that grace may abound? By no means! How can we who died to sin go on living in it? Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? Therefore we have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life. 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. We know that our old self was crucified with him so that the body of sin might be destroyed, and we might no longer be enslaved to sin. For whoever has died is freed from sin. But if we have died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him. We know that Christ, being raised from the dead, will never die again; death no longer has dominion over him. The death he died, he died to sin, once for all; but the life he lives, he lives to God. So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus.

### **Matthew 10: 24-39**

Jesus said, 'A disciple is not above the teacher, nor a slave above the master; it is enough for the disciple to be like the teacher, and the slave like the master. If they have called the master of the house Beelzebul, how much more will they malign those of his household! 'So have no fear of them; for nothing is covered up that will not be uncovered, and nothing secret that will not become known. What I say to you in the dark, tell in the light; and what you hear whispered, proclaim from the housetops. Do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul; rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell. Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground unperceived by your Father. And even the hairs of your head are all counted. So do not be afraid; you are of more value than many sparrows. 'Everyone therefore who acknowledges me before others, I also will acknowledge before my Father in heaven; but whoever denies me before others, I also will deny before my Father in heaven. 'Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword. For I have come to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law; and one's foes will be members of one's own household. Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; and whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me; and whoever does not take up the cross and follow me is not worthy of me. Those who find their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it.