

**CW Evensong 3rd before Advent Holy Trinity Cuckfield 22.xi.20. 1 Maccabees 2.12-15  
Matthew 28.16-20**

**Sermon 444 - Behaviour**

Abstract: Our behaviour entitles us to speak and our speech entitles us to proclaim; so let us start with behaviour.

\* 1 Maccabees 2.12-15

\* Matthew 18.16-20.

Because of the tendentious exclusion of the books of the Old Testament known, somewhat dismissively, as the Apocrypha, many non-Catholics are deprived of some of the best Jewish writing, particularly those books which show the transformation from story-telling to the construction of well-formed histories and what we would today call novels, including, for example, the stories of Susanna and Judith so dramatically depicted in the current exhibition of the paintings of Artemisia Gentileschi. But perhaps the most unfortunate casualty of this massive omission is the history of the Maccabees because without it the story of the Chosen People after their return from the Babylonian Exile at the end of the Sixth Century BC just peters out. The history of the Maccabean revolt against the Assyrians is the most detailed and dramatic story in pre Christian Jewish writing which demonstrates quite extraordinary courage in defence of monotheism against pagan idolatry; and our brief First Reading forms a fitting precursor to the final Verses of Matthew's Gospel whose fulfilment meant martyrdom for many. Christian tradition says that all of the Apostles, barring John, were martyred; and thousands of others were to follow. For these people the issue was simple but by no means easy: did their Christian allegiance oblige them to rule out all compromises with the secular authorities and die in defence of an absolute truth. The major features of this issue were set out clearly in the Maccabean story of the seven brothers who were encouraged by their widowed mother to die for their faith. To survive, they could have eaten pork and pleaded duress, or that this was not such a big issue, but instead they were all executed. The same set of considerations faced the early Christian martyrs: could they nominally worship Caesar just for appearance's sake or because it did not really conflict with their Christian beliefs, or did they have to go to the limit?

We, in our time, are sad witnesses of extensive Christian persecution; indeed, because of global media coverage we might be living through the worst Christian persecution since Roman times but it does not affect us here.

I began to wonder about where our Christian bottom line lies as we were glued to Cable Network News for four days watching the culmination of the American Presidential Election during which it was revealed that the vote of Evangelical Christians for Donald Trump hardly declined after four years during which the only dispute is about how many lies the President has told: if you read the New York Times it's over 10,000, if you read the Washington Post it's more than 20,000. Or, to put the issue differently, from the Evangelicals' point of view, how many lies are equivalent to a prevented abortion.

Looked at from our own perspective, identifying bottom lines is not as easy as it was for the Jewish and Christian martyrs. We live in a democracy where there are many issues to consider rather than the one issue of allegiance. And although it may not always work, ranking is a very successful starting point. So, using Evangelical Christians again so as not to become enmeshed in British politics, how should an Evangelical rank the issue of abortion in relation to the poverty that usually brings it about? If we are really against abortion would it not be better to prevent the felt need for it? Or how would we rank the importance of personal behaviour compared with declared policy: if President Trump claims that he is a respecter of women but is known to be just the opposite in private life, what matters more, his good policy or his bad behaviour? Taken right back to its basics, we have to ask how a personal action or a policy reflects the life and teaching of Jesus.

But no matter how I try to discuss this issue in a rather abstract way, each of us has to decide how to deal with the conflicting claims of democratic citizenship. Our bottom lines may be different but each of us needs to know how we judge public figures from a Christian standpoint.

One caveat in thinking about these issues is the tendency to rank the easy abstract above the difficult personal; to defend a principle even if that hurts real people.

But, to go back one more stage, how do we rank issues as Christians, quite regardless of secular politics? How, for instance, can we simultaneously oppose abortion and support capital punishment? Or how can we support justice for the poor and oppose the taxation to pay for it? Or, closer to home, how do we rank the preservation of historic churches and forwarding Christ's mission, or emphasising Biblical passages on sexual behaviour while overlooking the many more passages on social justice?

The simplistic answer to these dilemmas has been that all Biblical issues are of equal rank but that is to suppose that we have unlimited time, money and communications opportunities.

Finally, returning to our Readings, where Maccabees asks us to admire courage, Matthew asks us to display it. The point of the good example is that we should not just admire but imitate. What does it mean for us when we are told to go and teach all nations, baptising people in the name of the Trinity? At the very least this means three things, in ascending order of difficulty: first, we must live as Christians; secondly, we must speak as Christians; and, thirdly, we should proclaim as Christians. Each of these is the necessary precondition of the next, so that the starting point is always our behaviour, what we do, which gives us the right to speak of what we do and then to proclaim. So let us start with the behaviour.