

JUNE 21ST SERMON FOR ST GEORGE'S EASTERGATE:

I don't know about you but there are certain things that have been uppermost in my mind recently. One is the fact that, and I have been made aware of this in several conversations I have had with people, many of us have had bubbling just beneath the surface, an underlying fear of sickness and death. This of course is a normal human reaction to our own mortality; but at the moment every single day we have thrust in front of us the number of deaths there have been in the country because of Covid 19. This is a situation we have never been in before. We are well aware of the fact that hundreds of people die every day in this country but normally this fact is not forcibly centre stage as it is at the moment.

The second thing that has been very apparent recently is that during our health crisis we have seen clearly in an amazing way that the path of self sacrificial love is the only way forward for humanity; and this of course is the Jesus way. Over and against this there is also abundant evidence of the evil that humans can and do to each other. This has always been true and was in Jesus' own time; but now, more than ever it seems, is a time for the followers of Jesus to nail their colours to the mast...to stand up clearly for what they know to be the right way forward.

When we look at our Gospel reading we see how these issues were dealt with by Jesus...what he was saying to his followers in his own lifetime still is just as relevant to us now.

Let's look firstly at understandable human fear..fear of our own mortality and fragility. In this passage we have just read Jesus says not once but three times "Do not be afraid" or "have no fear"...He must have meant it musn't he;he repeated it three times. He must have realised that it was a natural human reaction for his followers then to be fearful in the face of growing opposition to his own ministry. He doesn't just say..God will look after you, although that is undoubtedly true; no, he is more precise than that.

The first reason he gives is that truth will out! "Nothing is covered up that will not be uncovered" is how he put it. In other words integrity will be vindicated; his followers will be eventually seen to be on the right path. We are, in our present crisis already seeing this beginning to happen; as I have already said the path of self sacrificial love for others, the Jesus way, is generally applauded by the public in a way that is unusual in normal circumstances. We know that this sort of behaviour is inexplicable if the Christian Gospel is not true; it doesn't make sense to risk your own life for another if ultimately there is no meaning behind the universe; but what we are seeing is that humans are hard wired to do just that...truth will out! THAT is precisely why

Jesus said we should not be afraid to proclaim his way from the rooftops.

The second reason Jesus gives his followers for not being afraid is that we are not just mortal bodies, we have an inner spiritual side as well; we are not just body but body and soul. Note here that alongside his promise that we do not have any need to be ultimately afraid of danger to our mortal bodies is also the warning of the fact that attacks to our souls are the real danger; awareness that there is evil in the world that tries to lead us away from keeping our souls safe. Many of our brothers and sisters in parts of the world where there is fear of persecution and even death if you proclaim truth openly know this as a reality only too well.

To balance this real danger we have Jesus third assertion though and it is just this. God our Father and Creator is aware of and cares for every living thing....He knows us through and through, every one of us, even the hairs on our heads are counted! [for many of us at the moment that is an even more extraordinary fact than normal!] We are known, and have been known since conception, by almighty God. We are loved and cared for so even when there is a very uncertain future ahead of us this is one fact we can rely upon.

Towards the end of our Gospel Jesus brings his help for us into sharp relief by talking about priorities; namely we Christians, if our faith is going to be of any use in this or any

other situation, must make our allegiance to Jesus top of our list of priorities. Jesus is not saying here that everyone who follows him will find themselves split off from their family; actually the passage about sons and fathers, daughters and mothers,, is a quotation from the prophet Micah where the prophet predicts the terrible divisions that would occur when God would be seen to be doing a new thing. When we pray for our post Covid world we are praying , are we not, for God to be doing a new thing, to renew our world...as part of our prayers, as we learnt last week, we have to be prepared to be part of the answer. Perhaps not to go back to our old comfortable lifestyles; it is so much easier is it not to prefer comfort to challenge; but I am afraid challenge is always what Jesus gives us to help us in our earthly pilgrimage...his closing words in this reading are “ 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.” Do we really believe that?

So as we look to the future we are told, not advised, by Jesus not to be afraid. We are on the right path; God’s way of living as shown in Jesus will, and is beginning to, be seen to be the only right way. We are all loved through and through by God...even when we do feel afraid he understands...and from this understanding says clearly to us that the only way forward is to give total priority to

identifying publicly with Him...there is no going back!
AMEN