

Tenth Sunday in Ordinary Time 2020

1 Kings 19:9-18, Romans 10:4-15, Matthew 14:22-36

As Chaplain to the Army Recruit Training Centre we would take raw recruits through two days of 'Character Development.' Early in these sessions we would draw a large 'blob' on a white board; it represented their lives, uneven, messy, and unpredictable. We would then ask them to call out what it was that was most threatening them, impacting on their lives. I'm sure you can imagine the response...no beer, no phone, no girlfriend, hungry, cold, tired etc etc. These words we would write outside the blob. We would then ask them to describe what it was that was enabling them to manage these issues, to hold them at bay. We would want them to say that courage, respect, initiative and teamwork were their source of strength, these being the Army's core values. The army teach an ancient model, which we first know of through Aristotle, that the way to instill values is to keep practicing them until they become habitual. Hence in recruit training the staff keep pushing the recruits keep creating environments where all they have are the values of the Army. There is no beer, no girlfriend, no phone. I would teach this but there were times when I was uneasy. I wanted to say much more to these young men and women.

We live in a time when 'values statements' seem to be the 'be all and end all' for many organisations; they have been something of a fad for some time. Perhaps you work in an organisation in which values are touted: many places of learning, universities, welfare organisations, the public sector and increasingly the business world demand of their employees adherence to a set of values; I noticed recently the term 'for values' as against 'for profit.' But what of the Church. It seems that many Churches today rather like the idea of a set of values to live by. A brief survey of the internet revealed an endless number of parishes and Church organisations with values statements on their websites, including our own. But is that what churches are about? Does the Church have a clearly articulated set of values?

The philosopher Nietzsche wrote that 'Christianity was the transvaluation of all values; it challenged and turned around all the values of the world.' Perhaps this is best articulated in the Beatitudes: blessed are the meek, the poor, the grieving, the merciful, the persecuted, they are perhaps the closest thing we have to a values statement. But they only really 'make sense,' in fact if they humanly do at all, if we practice and become habitual at one thing and that is faith. This is what I wanted the recruits to engage with, what I wanted them to put in their 'blob.' I would tell them that the values are meaningless unless they are accompanied by faith. This is where things became interesting and I began to stray dangerously from the tenets of military doctrine!

At the Morning Office recently I was suddenly struck by the words of Jesus in John's gospel: *even though you do not believe me, believe the works that I do*. Jesus is not simply the object of our faith, the one we believe in. He is the exemplar of our faith, he is way we ought to believe. In him we see the proper and perfect response to God, total and unself-regarding trust. I would sometimes draw my very own 'blob' when I was with the recruits. Outside I would simply write fear. Inside I would simply write faith.

In today's readings we see this issue that ultimately besets us all and prevents us from the being the community we are called to be...fear. And we read how we are to counter it...faith. In Elijah's encounter with God, he is fleeing from the authorities in fear of his life. He is told to face his fears, not by acts of great courage, no fire, wind or earthquake but by faith in the presence of God – the still small voice (a much nicer translation). More easily said than done you might well say! The gospels are the antidote, we read of the fear experienced by disciples in the boat and Peter's fear as he steps out to meet Jesus and is overwhelmed. This fear of the deep, fear of the unknown is ours too and always will be; our own faith will never suffice, but the faith *of* Christ will.

Among the many issues of our day is that of isolation. This is why the pandemic is so problematic. We are fearful because of isolation. So we combat fear and strengthen our faith by our communion. 'Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid.' They are words that we can rest in as we commune with God and with each other. 'Take *my* yoke' says Jesus, rest in *my* faith.

The problems with values in the modern sense is we rarely if ever keep to them. Most values statements are bland, toothless, or just plain dishonest platitudes. Dare I say they are little like those Christians we might bump into who Seamus Heaney describes as wearing 'the fixed smile of a pre booked place in paradise.' They are the ones who read today's passage from Romans with a simplicity that it cannot bear! Like empty values statements, they can create cynicism, at worst they can divide us. We are not all smiling, courageous, initiative taking, team players, no; we are not all faith - filled, no. Indeed we are none of these *all of the time*. But as Paul reminds us we are all in this together, to paraphrase him: *For there is no distinction we are all one in the faith of Christ*. There is no lasting shame in our faults, because the good news is that our faith, what there is of it, is nested within that of Jesus and this is why we are thankful and blessed and why we can even begin to dare to step out of the boat! Of course we need courage, initiative, teamwork and many of the other virtues of our values statements but underneath them all must be faith, the antidote to our fear; I pray we can glimpse it 'in Christ.' Amen.