

Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost 2020

Jeremiah 15:15-21, Psalm 26:1-8, Romans 12:9-21, Matthew 16:21-28

I wash my hands in innocence, O Lord: that I may go about your altar,
And lift up the voice of thanksgiving: to tell of all your marvellous works.

This is not a message from the Chief Health Officer of the ACT! They are words from this morning's Psalm, they are words of preparation said by the celebrant at the lavabo before approaching the altar for the Eucharist, once again to sacramentally make *real* Christ's self-giving, this is our role to proclaim the cross - his marvellous work. This is reality but as TS Eliot reminded us 'human kind cannot bear very much reality.'

On Thursday last we celebrated the life of Monica the Mother of St Augustine of Hippo the 4th century North African Bishop. Monica famously prayed that her son would find the true faith and be baptised; she succeeded, eventually - after seventeen years. What Augustine, who we celebrated on Friday, had done was find a faith and theology that suited and affirmed his lifestyle. Manichaeism was a religion of dualism, its goal was to escape from the reality of the material world which was evil, dark, to the purity of the spiritual world of light. All this is brought to the fore in Augustine's 'Confessions,' a book which strikes me as being remarkably modern. Indeed Augustine's departure from the Manicheans came about because of his understanding of the science of his day. He wrote: *I had read a great many scientific books which were still alive in my memory. When I compared them with the tedious tales of the Manicheans, it seemed to me that of the two, the theories of the scientists were more likely to be true.* There are many folk today who would rather ignore science and engage in either conspiracy theories or a rather a wishy washy sort of spirituality, many adopt the mantra 'spiritual not religious.' What both of these groups of folk are doing is a flight from reality. But true religion is about reality, without religion our spirituality borders on the meaningless; or at best simply it is an ideal, the way I'd like reality to be.

We can glimpse something of this today in Peter's reaction to Jesus. Last week Jesus asks his closest followers 'who do you say that I am.' Peter speaks up - you are the Messiah; and he was affirmed by Jesus: this will be the foundation upon which the Church will be built. But today we realise that Peter's answer was problematic; he was right, but he was wrong! In the words of the book *1066 and all that* - the Cavaliers (wrong but wromantic), the Roundheads (right but repulsive). The messiah was a popular, almost romantic figure, a leader to bring the time of slavery to an end once for all, to restore the nation and the monarchy, he was a strongman. But in Jesus the messiah is a figure that is repulsive. Think of those words from Isaiah: he was 'a man of sorrows, one from whom people hide their faces, he was despised.' But importantly and this is the key to understanding the gospel look at this morning's passage from Jeremiah. He pleads: *Remember me and visit me, and bring down retribution for me on my persecutors,* when this fails he responds to God's seeming

impotence: 'Truly, you are to me like a deceitful brook, like waters that fail.' So much promise and we have come to this nadir. From Jesus' words of affirmation to Peter to a declaration that his intent is bordering on evil. The truth of Peter's declaration has been found to be a lie. Get behind me Satan! A figure best described in John's gospel: He is a liar and the Father of lies. So if Peter's understanding was a lie, then can we say that truth is to be found in the cross? And if so, where does all this lead us? Well it puts paid to the 'spiritual and not religious' delusion. It puts paid to the idea that we can have a spirituality on our own terms; one that we can shape. It puts paid to any idea that spirituality is somehow divorced from the world, it puts paid to dualism. It means that truth is to be found in the sometimes harsh reality of the world around us, in our lives, in lives lived sacrificially, in lives of self-giving.

St Paul towards the end of his first letter to the Corinthians says: *But it is not the spiritual that is first, but the natural, and then the spiritual.* The twentieth century theologian John Howard Yoder, once wrote that the cross 'is not foolish or weak but natural.' Yoder, the great advocate of non-violence claims the cross is natural. What can he mean? The advocates of 'spiritual not religious' would aspire to an ideal that is beyond, above, not physical, not natural. It is a romantic idea. It is Peter's messiah, an ideal, a figure with military bearing, on a white horse with a flag; but it's not real, not natural and at worse it's a lie.

The cross that Jesus tells his disciples he must endure and which he tells them and us that too must carry with him is the truth, it is real, natural. It heralds a new world, it heralds a new way of being. Yoder claims that Jesus' decision to go to the cross was an 'ontological decision' he means that the decision was to reveal who he is, but also what the world truly is, the cross is real, natural. The cross is the symbol of the real world, the world we are called to proclaim – the world that Paul describes to us today in his letter to the Romans. Up until this point in the letter 'love' has referred to God's love. Now Paul tells us this love is asked of us; take up your cross.

For Paul this a world of hope, endurance, perseverance, of living together with care, hospitality, solidarity in joy and in sorrow; of blessing not cursing. Importantly though this is a world in which there is no place for violence, vengeance is no more. This is Paul describing a world lived by the ethic of the cross. In the cross we are called to see the world in a certain way, know the world in a certain way. It involves a commitment to nonviolence and it is a life-shaping, mind-shaping kind of conviction—a conviction that shapes all other convictions. This is the truth, this is what it means to call Jesus, Messiah.

We proclaim a world made possible by the cross, a world we are to reveal, by taking up our own crosses. This is our religion, we cannot understand or make sense of our spirituality without engaging with reality, with our religion, a religion revealed to us by the cross. 'Spiritual not religious' is a lie. Truth is the Christ and him crucified. Amen.