

Sixth Sunday after Epiphany – 2022

Jeremiah 17:5-10, 1 Corinthians 15:12-20, Luke 6:17-26

Sometimes I wish I were the Parish Priest of Grantchester, life would be so much easier if I were just having to deal with the odd murder or two in the parish, drink a little scotch and then stand before you on a Sunday morning having quickly donned my surplice and scarf to regale you with some lovely homespun, off the cuff wisdom! Susan tells me that if she scrunches up her eyes enough I could pass for one of the two vicars of Grantchester, but I somehow doubt it! And of course even Grantchester in more recent times has had to deal with some of the more knotty issues of life presented by the Curate, Leonard.

But life isn't like that. No doubt many of you have watched with interest the difficult passage of the Religious Discrimination Bill through the Parliament. I wonder whether it is possible to legislate for such things. It seems a blunt instrument for deeply held beliefs, matters of conscience and issues where clearly there is the question obedience to a tradition. It is perhaps a naïve view, and I haven't read the bill, but I strikes me that if what we are doing is truly 'of God,' then we shouldn't need protection. I don't believe we need protection, but then again we are not part of a religious or cultural minority and we must be aware that is not all about bigotry and discrimination. I am aware that is a simplistic view, but perhaps that is what I am yearning for in matters of faith and practise.

And so it is with some relief that our readings today actually get the very nub of Christian life: Blessing! Blessed are those who trust in the Lord' preached Jeremiah, 'Blessed are they who have not walked in the counsel of the ungodly' wrote the Psalmist and 'Blessed are you who are poor, Blessed are you who are hungry, Blessed are you who weep and Blessed are you when people hate you', the words of Jesus in Luke's 'Sermon on the Plain.'

Blessed are those...is that us? Luke's beatitudes seem to speak of physical poverty, hunger and sadness. Not the poverty of spirit and the hunger for righteousness that we read in Matthew's version. The vast majority of us are not poor, hungry, or vilified and most of us are not perpetually in a state of mourning - typical Luke, it's all very earthy and real; so are we blessed? Blessed are those...they are set aside, they are special, they are mine and I don't believe this is exhaustive, Jesus' list could go on! This should make us think very carefully. Rowan Williams in a poem called 'Now I tell' you concludes:

What, then, was blessing? A code? Sheer wordplay?
Some scratched their heads, others left for softer fare;
Some stayed, ears prickly, consciences seared.
Yet something of sheepish hope also appeared,

And as he paused, his lips a constant prayer,
He burnt their hearts with all his brightest day.

Paul reminds his hearers today to think very carefully - I get a sense he is rather losing patience with them; it's the resurrection stupid! He warns them we may even be found to have been misrepresenting God. That's an interesting charge, today! We are nothing if we are not people of the resurrection and the resurrection is nothing if it is simply another event, another miracle in the life of Jesus. Everything, the incarnation, the life of Jesus, the miracles, the teaching, the healing are nothing if he has not been raised from the dead.

There are important ethical implications in the resurrection of Christ. Some folk say to me what would happen if Jesus came to St Philip's, I have to confess I'm much more worried at what would happen if Paul came! For Paul, the belief in Christ's resurrection was the core of faith. Paul's concern was that, without the belief in the resurrection, morality loses all meaning. If that is taken away, not much is left. As Albert Schweitzer famously argued, Jesus' ethical message is not relevant in our modern society. In the passage following today's lection, which is actually missing in the Lectionary Paul, paraphrasing Isaiah writes: 'If the dead are not raised, let us eat and drink, because tomorrow we will die.' He then goes on to quote a Greek stand-up comic, Menander: 'Do not be deceived, bad company ruins good morals,' Jeremiah perhaps had been reading his scripts.

If Christ has been raised, the resurrection stands as the greatest blessing, it is nothing less than the renewal and recreation of humanity. It is not simply an event but a way of being and living. It changes everything, the lives of poor, the hungry, the sorrowful, the vilified are raised up, hope becomes a valid way of life for them and not just these categories of disadvantage but many others, some of whom we barely see or appreciate.

The resurrection is a blessing we are called to live and make real today - feed my sheep. We as a church need to be careful as we move forward together. How do we protect those, particularly those who have come among us recently and whose lives, cultures and religions are so different from ours as well as those who are struggling to fit in with definitions and categories in which they are painfully uncomfortable.

I would rather prefer to offer some homespun wisdom from Grantchester, but that is rather difficult. We must always ask ourselves: Will we be found to have been misrepresenting God? Who are the blessed that Jesus speaks of, in our day and time. Does my life reveal the resurrection and the renewed vision that it brings? Amen.