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Christ Church West Wimbledon
Sermon :
September 30, 2018 ~ “Eighteenth Sunday of Trinity”

Every time I start to prepare my sermon, I carefully study the readings set for today and then sit down at a blank computer screen. Sometimes the words flow quickly and easily. Sometimes they don't. This was one of those latter weeks! Of course I could have talked about our recent discussions on the new vision for Christ Church – but this is still very much a work in progress and it is too early to share our current thinking. I could have reflected on our recent parish pilgrimage to Assisi – but that's not always interesting for those who weren't there: which reminds me of the Vicar who spoke at length about his foreign holiday to his congregation and finished with the words “I really wish I was still there” – to which someone in a loud whisper was heard to mutter “and we wish you were still there too”. So there is nothing for it but to go back to the set readings for today: with their message “Don't let your body lead you into sin and risk exchanging eternal life for eternal punishment”. Now to be honest nobody talks much about hell these days. Thankfully we have moved away from the graphic fire and brimstone images of the medieval artists.

But when Jesus taught his first disciples, they found it very difficult to take in some of the things he was saying. For instance they didn't quite understand that God is for all people and not just for those within the inner circle. In our generation, we hold in our minds the phrase of a previous Archbishop of Canterbury, William Temple, who in the 1940s, reminded the Church of England: “The Church is the only society that exists for the benefit of those who are not its members.” Literally, God is for everyone.

In our reading from Mark, Jesus is teaching his followers what discipleship really means. But Jesus is not pretending that temptation is easy to cope with – it can be extraordinarily difficult. Even so, as we read Mark's account, we may feel that the response of Jesus to John seems unduly harsh. John has assumed that Jesus is building up a following and needs to see off any rivals. But Jesus' mission is simpler – he has come to ‘seek out and save the lost’ – for God is for everyone. On many occasions, Jesus releases people from disease or fear and then sends them on their way rejoicing. John wonders: shouldn't he be getting them to sign their membership forms to join

his new movement? But John's understandable question is met with a fierce call to sacrifice anything that stands in the way of that overriding duty to serve.

One commentator on this passage writes this: "The reason for Jesus' urgent concern for us is that sin has eternal terrible consequences that we can barely imagine. It is forfeiting eternal life we are talking about and some kind of eternal punishment which certainly fills Jesus with horror to think of. If he was taking it that seriously, then surely we would be wise to do the same. We are called to be preservers – like salt – working at preserving souls for a glorious eternal life which is God's will for us all. We can't do that if we are allowing our own bodies and attitudes to lead us deep into sin. Neither can we kid ourselves we are preservatives unless we are actively committed to helping others towards the kingdom". Tough, hard words. Yet we know in our hearts as human beings that the Christian path is a tough, hard way to follow. Jesus, in his agony in the garden of Gethsemane, as he watched and prayed to resist the temptation to opt out of the work of salvation, pleads with Peter and the others to do the same, so they will not fall when they are tempted. But they slept instead.

We have the golden opportunity to keep awake and we are doing our best to do that. It is why we are spending many collective hours thinking about what and who this church is for; what we are all for? It is why many of us are involved in a whole host of activities in and around the church – and there will be the chance to be involved in new initiatives such as creating an Eco-Church and supporting a Syrian refugee family – and more of all that will be announced soon. All of this adds up to the clear message to the world that we are not a cosy closed club – we are the body of Christ – and we continue to be so when we leave this place and go to work, to school, to the shops, to help and support the local and wider community.

And we remember above all that we are called to be a people of prayer, a church of prayer – emphasised in our first reading from the letter of James. For it is by prayer that we are marked out – everything we try to do is encircled by prayer: prayer to God through our Lord Jesus Christ. For it is by prayer that we are reminded that we can do nothing in our own strength but in the strength of God.

So we know we have to tread with care, ensuring that we live our lives as carefully and honourably and humbly as we can. William Temple, mentioned already, wrote: "Humility does not mean thinking less of yourself than of other people, nor does it mean having a low opinion of your own gifts. It means freedom from thinking about yourself one way or the other at all". So it is by taking on the mantle of humility that

we can be at peace – be at peace with one another and be at peace with ourselves – and with that armour we can try our best to resist the temptations around us. And let us not forget the one crucial aspect of our faith: we all need forgiveness of our sins more than we need anything else, because the forgiveness of our sins is our key to entry into the kingdom of God, our key to eternal life – and that is the grace of God.

One final thought. A saying has been doing the rounds recently but which has been around for a long time. Nobody seems to know with certainty where it comes from – but we might imagine it being said by St Francis of Assisi or even by Jesus Christ himself. It's a mantra that might be useful to remember as we try to live our lives as carefully and honourably and sin free as we can. It goes like this:

“Before you speak, let your words pass through three gates: ‘Is it true?’ Is it necessary?’ ‘Is it kind?’

Amen.