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Christ Church West Wimbledon
Sermon : March 24th, 2019
“Third Sunday of Lent”

LENT 3 2019 PREACHED BY THE REVEREND MICHAEL BURNS

Very occasionally I am really gripped by a film or a play not easily forgotten. Two immediately spring to mind.

30 years ago the film ‘Dead Poets Society’ was released starring Robin Williams. Set in 1959 at the fictional elite conservative Vermont boarding school Welton Academy, it tells the story of an English teacher who inspires his students through his teaching of poetry. They are surprised by his unorthodox teaching methods as he encourages his students to ‘make your lives extraordinary’.

Then to Alan Bennett who has been part of the entertainment scene of this country for over 50 years. His wonderful play and film, ‘The History Boys’, set in the 1980’s, is about 8 bright boys in their final school year as they sit their Oxbridge entrance exams, pressured by their ambitious headmaster.

There is one teacher, a maverick, who has the heart of a romantic poet, who wants to make the boys thoughtful, who doesn’t put them under pressure to pass the exam, but whose philosophy is ‘education is for the heart and you learn through life’s experiences rather than through things written on paper – and everything you do is a lesson’. He loves quoting AE Houseman ‘All knowledge is precious whether or not it serves the slightest human use’.

There is another teacher who sees that her job is to transmit information; that facts, facts, facts must be fed to the boys to enable them to pass their entrance exam.

Finally there is the new, smart teacher who wants them to think outside the box, who encourages them to learn by discussion and debate – in other words, his way of studying history is not to search for truth but to produce the most interesting answer.

Towards the end of the History Boys, the maverick teacher speaks these words ‘Pass the parcel – take it, feel it and pass it on’. In Dead Poets Society, the teacher who encourages his students to ‘make your lives extraordinary’ summarizes this sentiment with the Latin expression, ‘carpe diem’, meaning ‘seize the day’.

Today’s Gospel reading is both enigmatic and alarming but with a similar message. The focus seems to be on seizing the moment for repentance, rather than assuming that life will potter along to a gentle conclusion. The Galileans who were executed by Pilate or the people killed by a collapsing building were not getting their just deserts; they got caught up in things beyond their control and had no time to sort out their lives. The fig tree has no idea how close it comes to being chopped down today. ‘Seize the moment: do not put it off for a tomorrow that may not come’ is the message of Jesus.

Living for today is something of a mantra for many – not least in a world where personal tragedy and even sometimes extreme violence can strike at any time. None of us knows what tomorrow will bring – so we have to live in the present and leave the future in the hands of God. Yet that doesn’t mean we should sit back and do nothing. At the very least we need to ensure our inner spiritual MOT, if you like, is up to date, that we are at peace with ourselves as well as with our family and friends. For one of the strong strands running through the Lenten season is that of repentance. It begins as we are ashed with the sign of the cross on Ash Wednesday – a visible sign of our need for repentance – and continues to be a theme in many of our prayers, hymns and readings.

‘One more chance’. ‘Just give me one more chance’ – how often, throughout our lives, have we heard that phrase. It is used in all sorts of contexts – a child who has done something wrong – again – to a parent; a pupil to a teacher; a husband to a wife; a criminal to a judge; a tree to a gardener, as it were! Or a penitent to God.

The image of the fig tree is a strong one and especially to those who are gardeners. Spring is a time when we set foot outside and survey the damage that winter has done and decide on a course of action to get the garden looking as we want it to. For all of us, Lent is also an excellent time when we can make space to look carefully at our lives and act on what we see – cut down those things about ourselves which we know to be wrong and lay some strong fertilizer, if you like, to build up those parts of our lives which we know need feeding, which we know are worth saving.

In the grounds of Lambeth Palace where the Archbishop of Canterbury lives and works is a huge fig tree which dominates the courtyard. Planted in 1556 it has been at risk on a number of occasions but is testament to those who have cherished and nurtured it down the centuries, an example of what can happen when something is cared for properly and carefully.

In our new Christ Church Vision, we are encouraged to ‘Share God’s Love’ – a thread to run through everything we do and are as Christians. In my previous Diocese, the strapline was a similar one ‘Living God’s Love’. The Bishop’s senior staff used to joke to each other when they met up on a Monday morning. They would ask each other what they had been doing over the weekend? ‘Oh, I’ve been living God’s Love!’ was the usual answer. In a similar way, we should be able to reply to enquirers ‘I’ve been sharing God’s love’. But we can only do that if we are humble before God, aware of our human frailty, conscious of our doubts, offering our questions about our faith, thankful for our blessings – and then firmly leave the rest up to God.

Remember that memorable quote by Jean Vanier “We’re not called by God to do extraordinary things, but to do ordinary things with extraordinary love”. Let that be our mantra as we live our lives day by day ‘Sharing God’s Love’. Amen.