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Christ Church West Wimbledon
Sermon : February 13th, 2022
“The Queen’s Platinum Jubilee”

13 FEBRUARY 2022 – THIRD SUNDAY BEFORE LENT

Occasionally I am asked – as I was this week – what is my approach to preparing a sermon and how long it takes me to write? I am sometime unsure whether such an enquiry is a subtle hint from the questioner that they could do much better if only they were given half a chance! No matter. The short answer is that I tend to mull carefully over the set readings for some time and trust that something will start to take shape. Sometimes it does – and sometimes it doesn’t. Today the readings starkly outline the challenges and rewards of living by faith – neither easy nor simple.

In our reading from Corinthians, we have a detailed argument about the resurrection. I’m not a fan of theological argument so it was the final verse that spoke to me with its clear statement of faith, rather than the pros and cons in the actual debate: “But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have died”.

Our Gospel comes after the resentful anger of the teachers and Pharisees resulting from Jesus’ healing on the Sabbath, and after the apostles have been chosen and called. Luke sets his account of the Beatitudes on a level place with a

large crowd, and Jesus is looking at his disciples as he speaks. They have given up so much to follow him – and they need reassurance. Yet still Jesus outlines to them his extraordinary teaching, that they – and we - will be much happier if we trust in God. And he goes on to teach them: *‘Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God. Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you will be filled. Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh. Blessed are you when people hate you, and when they exclude you, revile you, and defame you on account of the Son of Man.* Fine words – but not necessarily very comforting to the disciples who may well have become poor, hungry, upset, hated – all on account of their rashly responding to the call to them of Jesus.

No, following the Christian way of life has never been an easy path to follow. Yet today’s readings challenge us to choose the risky vulnerability of living by faith in God. Putting our trust in God will enable us to live as free, contented and generous-hearted people – the kind of people we would, deep down, probably prefer to be. But it is, as I say, not easy to be a Christian, then or now.

Then I remembered back to something that happened one Valentine’s Day a few years ago. I was to lead an assembly at a state primary school on the 14th February. How to avoid having to talk about Valentine’s Day, I asked myself? I’d just overheard two teenagers talking: “I hate Valentine’s Day”, said one to the other – “there’s so much pressure”. Fortunately, the school staff had got there before me and had very sensitively and imaginatively re-designated it as “Feeling Good Day”. So the task was would I come and talk about “what makes a Christian feel good”?

What makes a Christian feel good? That is definitely a challenging question. I wonder how you would have answered? What makes you feel good by being a

Christian, by being here in Church this morning? I came up with a few things for the children to think about – being able to light a candle and pray to God; reading the Bible; worshipping together with other Christians; caring for each other and helping to make new disciples; being able to trust in God. You’ll hopefully think of lots of other more imaginative and realistic things which make a Christian feel good. When Jesus talks, in the Sermon on the Mount, of our calling to be perfect in such things as generous loving, he gives us the reason – “be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect”. We, as God’s children, need to share his characteristics – his mannerisms – an example of which is a calling to be perfect through our generosity of spirit.

One thing that also might make us feel good is the realisation that we are all called to be Christ-like, to be like Christ – and we are following generations of Christians who have gone before us. When we are baptised, we have the sign of Jesus Christ marked on our foreheads. It’s as if we’ve got God’s stamp on us. We are marked out as his children and we have been freely given the right to belong in God’s kingdom. So our lives need to be built upon a firm foundation of faith through, for example, the gifts of the spirit: love and peace and joy, patience and kindness, goodness, gentleness and self-control.

Those first disciples of Jesus wanted reassurance. We today want reassurance. Such a thing is not always found in the set Bible readings which can challenge and disturb. Maybe we sometimes also need to look elsewhere for a sense of comfort and peace in our faith. For example, maybe that sense of gentleness and quiet calmness is echoed in the lovely hymn we have just sung ‘Dear Lord and Father of Mankind’ with its many comforting phrases: *“Re-clothe us in our rightful mind, in purer lives thy service find”*; and – *“drop thy still dews of quietness till all our strivings cease; take from our souls the strain and stress, and*

let our ordered lives confess the beauty of thy peace"; and finally our prayer that God may *"speak through the earthquake, wind and fire his still small voice of calm"*. He is the same God who can give us a sense of peace and joy as he gave to those first disciples called from their work in the sea of Galilee.

So perhaps that is enough to keep us going for now – for us who are called to show his love in his Church gathered together, and by our lives as they are transformed into the image of Christ our Lord? Amen.