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Christ Church West Wimbledon
Sermon : Second Sunday of Lent
Sunday 13th March 2021

LENT 2 : 2022

It is quite extraordinary how the dreadfully worrying and unsettling times in which we are currently living is reflected in so much Christian literature. The theme of our readings for today can be summed up as “If only we put our faith in God, he will fill our lives with meaning and bring us safely to heaven”. A right and proper sentiment. But we are also those who watch the news 24 hours a day as horror upon horror unfolds in a country some 1500 miles away but which is impacting on all our lives here in so many ways. We feel so helpless. Watching these events as they unfold puts our own lives into some sort of real perspective. Many of us might feel guilty that we really have nothing to complain about or worry about in our comfortable lives; that we may even feel it is wrong to enjoy an evening at the theatre or to have a meal with friends while so many suffer. But that has always been the same down the centuries in a world which is so unbalanced and unequal and about which we can do so little. But what we can do, we do. I repeat words I used last week from Desmond Tutu: *“Do your little bits of good where you are. It’s those little bits of good put together that overwhelm the world.”* Thus, we donate much needed money for the disaster and we also pray as hard as we can that this conflict may end. At the same time what many are going through puts our minor niggles into perspective. Thus, each of us has become conscious that we should

never to take anything or anyone for granted; conscious that we must always give thanks to God for the lives we live; conscious never to forget the desperate needs of many living in our world who are not as fortunate as are we.

For myself as Lent has begun in these unsettling times, I have been doing some reflecting on the best known of all the psalms, psalm 23 – ‘The Lord is my Shepherd, I lack nothing’. I’ve been re-reading an anthology of Psalm 23 which has some different modern paraphrases which I like. For example, there’s the pilot’s psalm, which begins ‘The Lord is my pilot, I shall not drift’ or a Japanese version which begins ‘the Lord is my pace setter, I shall not rush’. Then there’s the mountaineer’s version: ‘My guide is the Lord: he will not let me wander’. What about ‘The Lord is like my probation officer, he will help me’ or a 23rd psalm for space travel: ‘The Lord is my controller, I shall not deviate’; finally the student’s version: ‘The Lord is my teacher, I shall be taught’.

All of these different versions have one thing in common – they encourage the reader to look ahead, rather than to look back. The shepherd is one of the most vivid images in the Bible. Weaving through the Bible, we read of God as the shepherd of Israel and Jesus as the shepherd to all who follow him. In one passage from Luke chapter 15, we have the famous picture of God as a shepherd who goes out of his way to find the one sheep that had got lost.

That image is echoed in a slightly different way in today’s Gospel reading a couple of chapters earlier in Luke. In this passage we picture Jesus longing to gather up the people of Jerusalem as a hen gathers her chickens to safety under her wings. However, it is clear that he will not force his love and help on anyone if they do not wish to receive it. It seems clear that if the people still refuse to come, he will let them go the way they choose to go, allowing them that freedom they may desire.

Yet in our other reading, we are encouraged to realise what we gain from putting our faith in God. The wonderful Pauline letter to the Philippians, written by Paul from his prison cell, extols the virtues of living lives with our eyes firmly set on heaven and not on earthly things. “Brothers and sisters, join in imitating me, and observe those who live according to the example you have in us”. Another translation reads: “Join with others in following my example and take note of those who live according to the pattern we gave you”. Paul finishes this passage with the encouragement: “Therefore, my brothers and sisters, whom I love and long for, my joy and crown, stand firm in the Lord in this way, my beloved.

“According to the pattern” is the lovely translation of that phrase in this particular letter. Those of you who knit or draw know you have to follow the pattern with care, otherwise the end result will be a disaster. For our lives as Christians, we have a pattern to follow – the pattern of the life of Jesus Christ. It is why we spend much of our lives not just learning about Jesus but also trying to be like him. Frustratingly, there is so much we are not told in the Gospels about him. We know little of his early life as a child or a young adult. It’s only when he reached the age of about thirty that we can really get a vision of what Jesus was like. And we know that a large part of his life and ministry was spent going forwards, not backwards. In verse 33 of Luke, Jesus says to the Pharisees ‘today, tomorrow and the next day I must be on my way’ – as one translation has it ‘I must keep going’ – and that was always his philosophy – not to look back but to move forwards, driven by the goal of teaching people to love and worship God and love and care for their neighbours.

In many religions and philosophies, human beings are encouraged to look ahead. A wise prophet once said: ‘yesterday is but a dream, tomorrow is only a vision. But today well lived makes every yesterday a dream of happiness, and every tomorrow a vision of hope.’ Then again: ‘Yesterday is history, tomorrow is a mystery and today is a gift which is why it is called the present’. In the

Christian Bible, in Hebrews chapter 12, we are encouraged to forge ahead with these famous words: 'let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, fixing our eyes on Jesus.'

What I suppose I am trying to share this morning is that, whatever words we use, we know in our heart of hearts that it is when we put our faith in God to be with us in all that lies ahead, then he will give our lives new meaning and purpose. This morning we thank God for the pattern of life that we have all been given to follow in Jesus of Nazareth, the Good Shepherd – and let us each resolve in our own way, to deny ourselves, take up our cross and follow him – and a large part of the cross which all Christians are carrying at the moment lies with the millions in our world who are suffering, not least in Ukraine.

Jesus has given us the pattern for our lives to be well-lived. “Therefore, my brothers and sisters, whom I love and long for, my joy and crown, stand firm in the Lord in this way, my beloved”. So, we trust that he will guide us through everything that lies ahead as we seek to stand firm in the Lord.