

SERMON – 10 JULY 2020 – Matthew 13.1-9, 18-23

“Such great crowds gathered around him that he got into the boat and sat there, while the whole crowd stood on the beach”.

Social distancing in the Bible. This one, though, was to enable the crowd to hear better, to enable them to see, something positive. Nowadays crowds have a different meaning. To some, a crowd is an indicator of economic regeneration, Victory over the Virus, normality restored, the Triumph of Boris – to others, a crowd is a frightening thing, a dangerous thing, something we have no desire to be part of.

Only time will tell who is right – the trouble is, the stakes are very high (especially if it is your loved one who dies). Somehow we in the church have got to trace a line that copes with all the people of our country, and not just those we agree with!

It is not easy, it is not going to be easy. Several times this last week I’ve felt like chucking it all in and going off to be a hermit, and it is only going to get worse.

We have to take the victories. I have not succeeded in placating various people who want to hire our Halls and hire them now – “no, you can’t, I’ve not had the legal permission that I need before I can let you in (and, yes, I have asked the Archdeacon)” – but we have arranged for the School’s Out Club to use St Edmund’s Hall for the whole of the summer holiday. They come into the “early years education” category and we have the legal framework in place to accommodate them. We will earn some money. We will enable some parents to work and make childcare possible. We are able to do something to benefit our community. We can do this!

Last September there was a Scarecrow Festival in Allestree. Michèle worked hard and put a Scarecrow Vicar in the pulpit, we had the church open, and 381 people came in during one day. They want to do the Festival again this year, but when the email came I put it into the “worry about this nearer the time” pile. The same email went to one of our church families, who have responded, full of ideas and enthusiasm. We’ll probably do a scarecrow in the churchyard, and I’ve suggested we could have a lockdown Vicar asleep in his chair in the Vicarage garden. We will be here, we will be part of it, we will be present, and if it’s unwise to have so many people in church, then we’ll talk to them outside at a social distance. We can do this!

Next week – we hope – we’ll have St Matthew’s open for a Sunday service at 10 am. (I say, we hope, because we’ve got a lot of paperwork to do first – do

check before you come, just in case it doesn't get sorted in time). We'd love to be a crowd together, I've got a list of people I want to hug (probably shouldn't put that in writing!!) – but we can't. It will be frustrating if your pew is one of those with a "Do not sit here" notice on. It will be frustrating if we're full when you get here (in which case, all I can offer is another service at 11). It will be frustrating when we can't sing. It will be frustrating when we are offered the sacrament in one kind only (the bread, not the wine). It is more than frustrating that I've got to produce separate Orders of Service for each Sunday. The list of frustrations goes on and on – and no doubt there will be many times this next week when the desire to be a hermit will be far greater than the desire to be Vicar of Allestree and Darley Abbey. But, you know what, we can do this!

It will be even more frustrating for those of you who, for perfectly understandable reasons, decide you don't want to come next Sunday. To know that your friends are in the church you love, and you're not – that hurts. I will continue to produce worship material and get it on the website. We have wondered whether we could film the service and put it on the website later that day – the technology of live-streaming will probably defeat us, but surely something online by Sunday afternoon should be possible. Two questions – (1) is it necessary? I don't want to spend hours producing something no one is going to watch. (2) does anyone have the technological and filming skills that I lack? If it is something you would like to watch - please get in touch. If it is something you can help with – please get in touch. We can do this!

We have a ministry to crowds, because crowds are people, and we have a message for people. We believe that the Gospel is important. More than ever, our world needs Good News. We need to assure people that God's love is stronger than this virus. We need to give people a purpose for life. We need to bring comfort and strength to people when life is tough. We need to preach a gospel of love, light, care and justice, in a world which is nasty, dark, uncaring and evil.

You do wonder how much good Jesus's boat trip did. Crowds of people on the shore, and he gets into a boat. He sits a little way off shore and preaches, tells stories, makes people think. Did it make much difference? Did everyone in the crowd go home happy, smiling, determined to live a better life, determined to build God's Kingdom? Or did it soon wear off when they got back to work, when the kids were being horrible, when life was tough? Perhaps it was a matter of life and death – perhaps some of those who were in the crowd today were also in the crowd on Good Friday, angry because this man who had told them stories, this man who gave them a lovely day out on the beach last summer, hadn't stood up and thrown off the yoke of their Roman overlords. "Crucify him".

It was ever thus – and Jesus knows that. It's why he preaches about seeds and planting, how many seeds don't produce the harvest we want.

Our Gospel is not easy. It requires us to stand up against evil, and there's plenty of that in the world. Evil is a force, and when you stand against a force, it fights back. I see the hatred that is directed at my daughter when she stands up on social media and fights for disability rights, or LGBTQ+ rights, or gets involved in Black Lives Matter. Sometimes I fight with her, on other occasions I haven't got the strength to go into battle for something I know is right and just, something that needs changing, an evil that needs calling out – I don't fight because I know the fight will be nasty. Yes, of course we pick our battles, but that shouldn't be an excuse for not getting involved in building the Kingdom of God.

Our Gospel is not easy because it needs people to change. We use the word evil, even though it isn't a popular word – other people are evil, we are fine. Well, no one is fine, all of us need to work to align our will, our being, with all the God would have us be. If you've got everything you need, if life is good – and it is for many (most) of the people we know – then do you see any point? Our gospel says there is a point for everyone, that this matters – not easy when people smile sweetly and ignore us.

I had a family tell me this week how much this church means to them, but they haven't entered it for the last three years (since the last funeral), and before then it was several years since they came. Then I think, why bother to reopen? As long as the clock is chiming most of the village will be happy. I can be angry, I can be sad – or we can be here for when they do need us, constantly inviting, welcoming, being glad to serve, doing our best to model the Kingdom of God and proclaiming Good News.

Last week I purchased the 1913 map of Darley Abbey. Absolutely fascinating seeing how small the community was a century ago. Also fascinating to realise how isolated the church and Vicarage was from the community. Everybody lived in the houses down by the Mill, the church is up the hill, and the Vicarage even further up the hill. Obviously the Vicar was of the class that wasn't expected to live with the workers, he was in a big house, higher up the social status, literally higher up the hill. It's easy to be rude and to wonder why the Church of England always distances itself from the people who need the Kingdom.

It looks a little as if the crowd is down there, and the church is in a boat, moored out a little in the bay. Well, it worked for Jesus – and it will work for us.