

SERMON – 13 FEBRUARY 2022 – 1 Cor 15.12-20, Luke 6.17-26



In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

“Jesus came down with the disciples and stood on a level place, with a great crowd of his disciples and a great multitude of people from all Judea, Jerusalem, and the coast of Tyre and Sidon.”

I had a question – “came down” from where? So I looked it up, and I realised that immediately before this we had the calling of the 12 disciples, after a night of prayer.

Now during those days he went out to the mountain to pray; and he spent the night in prayer to God. And when day came, he called his disciples and chose twelve of them, whom he also named apostles: Simon, whom he named Peter, and his brother Andrew, and James, and John, and Philip, and Bartholomew, and Matthew, and Thomas, and James son of Alphaeus, and Simon, who was called the Zealot, and Judas son of James, and Judas Iscariot, who became a traitor.

So I wondered what those 12 were thinking – I don’t suppose that Judas knew he was going to become a traitor. They must have seen Jesus at work, they must have listened and talked, and thought and prayed – Peter was a married man, had he sat and talked with his wife? And Jesus called them, do you think he asked them to follow him? or when he said “follow me” you didn’t need to be asked, you just did it.



I can imagine the crowd, all those other disciples and followers now gathering round Jesus as he stood on his “level place”, and the 12 going to help and organise them. A great multitude of people need some organising, and they’d come quite a way to listen to Jesus. They are here to listen, to be healed of their diseases, and those with unclean spirits need to be cured. We forget what it must be like to live in an age before doctors and medics, so when you are ill, or someone you love is ill, where else do you go? You go to Jesus, and you believe he will cure you – he is your only hope. Power comes out of him – we have the same language used when he heals the woman who touches his cloak – his power heals and transforms.



I imagine that, after such power had gone, Jesus must have been tired and drained. And yet, there is a contentment – a knowledge of being blessed. “Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you will be filled.” We struggle a bit with that, don’t we – the thought of being poor, none of us could cope with that. I had a day in London on Thursday and, as I usually do, walked quite a long way. I enjoy walking London, the thoroughfares, the little lanes, the parks – I don’t enjoy the homeless on the benches or the old man shuffling through the park in front of me picking up the discarded cigarettes so he can have a smoke. “Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of heaven” – that doesn’t help. Fortunately Christians in that City, and in this City, are doing their best to make the Kingdom of heaven (or at least a taste of it) a reality. It’s not enough, but it’s more than many others are doing – so I’ll give thanks to God for that, while acknowledging the sin of our society.

And yet, in an amazing way, the poor and the hungry throughout history – and today - have found that the Kingdom of God has transformed their lives. What people need today – the poor and the rich – is the Kingdom of God transforming lives. God can and does transform lives – if we let him. In London I walked past several churches that have served their community for centuries, been there in joy and in sadness – and they are still open, places of peace and prayer in a busy city, and we need to help people re-connect with faith, re-connect with God, his love and his kingdom. One church had a large plush noticeboard which listed all the staff – including an “Operations Director”. I offered that as a title for Caroline in our church office, I rather fancy having an “Operations Director” –

but she says that if that's her new title, she'll expect a large pay rise to go with it!

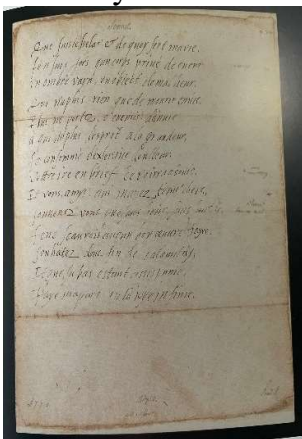


“Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh.” I walked past Great Ormond Street Hospital, and it's hard to believe it's 18 years since Gareth was first transferred there, and as I write this I remember the Hospital Chaplain commenting that there are many tears in her hospital. Tears of frightened children, children in pain – tears of frightened parents, parents who (however hard we tried) could not make our children better. She also commented how much laughter there is in her hospital. Children playing – playing even when they're connected to machines, or confined to bed, or when their life is drawing to a close. Laughter of parents finding strength and friendship in each other, and in each other's children – 18 years on, we still get a card from Emily's parents every Christmas. Their daughter had a transplant not long before Gareth, they came from Suffolk too, and it is a pleasure every year to hear about the adult she has become. Wonderful staff, who laughed and joked with us – and did an amazing job of keeping us going. The Kingdom of God is there in sadness, and in laughter.

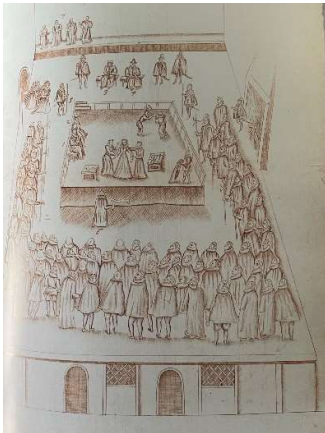
“Blessed are you when people hate you, exclude you, revile you, defame you on account of the Son of Man, on account of Jesus and our faith in him.” Again, we struggle with that – we all want to be liked, we all want to be appreciated. I've occasionally known anger or hatred against me, but not often – as a hospital chaplain especially I've been on the receiving end of people's anger, but it was usually because they were angry at the NHS or angry at God. Many of our fellow Christians face real opposition, real persecution, some across this world will have made the decision to come and worship this morning knowing that their church is a target – because they will not hide away, they will stand up for their faith, and if that means death, then so be it. Would any of us be so courageous, I don't think I would be.



“Rejoice and leap for joy” – for most of us our leaping days are over! The reward is great in heaven – and if life is tough, persecution real, death possible, then the promise of heaven is vital. I was in London to go and see the “Elizabeth and Mary, royal cousins, rival Queens” exhibition at the British Library – and it was fascinating. It was also poignant, you know that for Mary the story is going to end with her execution in Fotheringhay Castle on 8 February 1587.



In the exhibition was the final document that Mary wrote. At dinner on 7 February she had been informed by the Earls of Shrewsbury and Kent that she was to be executed in the morning. She took the news calmly, ate little, prayed for an hour, then composed her last will and testament and distributed her possessions among her servants. At 2 am she wrote her final letter, to her childhood friend and brother-in-law, King Henry III of France. She told him she was to be “executed like a criminal at eight in the morning” despite her innocence. She insisted that she had been condemned only for her Catholic faith and for “the assertion of her God-given right to the English crown.” She also wrote a sonnet, written in her own hand in French, beginning “What am I, alas, and what use is my life?” The poem expresses her sorrow and resignation at her fate, she describes herself as “a vain shadow, an object of misfortune, who no longer has anything in life, but to die”. She articulates her determination to have a good, Catholic death, anticipating her “share in everlasting joy”. I looked at that handwritten document and just wondered.



There was also an eyewitness drawing of her execution – it was reported that she lay upon the block most quietly and stretching out her arms she cried “In manus tuas domine” two or three times - “In manus tuas domine”, into your hands, O Lord.

May God forgive us, the way humans treat each other.

Although Jesus gives us cause to rejoice, he balances that with woes. Woe to the rich, woe to you who are full now, woe to you who laugh, woe to you when all speak well of you. All of us are so much richer than most of the world, we are certainly richer than the vast majority of our fellow Christians across this world. We are all full, and there’ll be more food later today. We have lots of laughter, and most people speak well of us. So we either decide that Christianity is not worth it, that it’s all ridiculous, and we’re better off without it – or we take the warning, and seek to align ourselves with what God wants of us all.



I can imagine 12 disciples talking to Jesus that night, trying to get their heads round what he had said – and over the next three years there were going to struggle with his words again and again. In the end Judas seems to have decided this wasn’t for him, and he needed to try and end it – the others ran away, but they were back just a few hours later, and all went on to follow Jesus until their deaths, indeed most of the 12 died because of the faith they had in Jesus.

For the last 2,000 years, men and women have believed in and strived for the Kingdom of God. Throughout history, men and women have worshipped God,

prayed to God, tried to care for their fellow men and women, tried to live by the example of Jesus, tried to make a difference in this world. Not all their motives have been pure, not all their actions have been right, sometimes their actions – even as Christians – have been evil. But they were loved, they were forgiven, they were children of God.



Queen Mary and Queen Elizabeth never met in real life. They are buried next to each other in Westminster Abbey – the British Library had stunning replicas of their tombs. One assumes that they have now met in the world to come – and trusts the reality of Christ's death and resurrection is the healing that they (and we) require.

Christian history has many faults, much evil, much to repent – just like the Christian present. But I do believe that across this world men and women worship God, pray to God, try to care for our fellow men and women, try to live by the example of Jesus, try to make a difference in this world. Not all our motives are pure, not all our actions are right, sometimes our actions, our values, are evil. But we are loved, we are forgiven, we are children of God. Together we work for the Kingdom, we glimpse it, and one day we will experience it in full.

Peter Barham
12 February 2022