

SERMON, 16 August 2020 - Romans 11.1-2a,29-32, Matthew 15.21-28

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

“I ask then, has God rejected his people” says Paul. Of course he hasn’t we say, and we know that’s true – but it doesn’t always feel like that. For 25 years, I’ve spent my ministry saying to people “the church is here for you”, “you’re always welcome”. We worked our socks off last year for the Bicentenary, welcoming people in – 2020 was going to be a year of building on that. I’m sure I am not the only church leader, church member, who has thought “what’s the b****y point”.

Paul is proud of his inheritance, and all of us should be proud of our inheritance, proud of our country, proud of our heritage and where we come from. I will happily sing Flanders and Swann “The English, the English, the English are best” – if only because it offends my Welsh wife. We are a very fortunate people, living in a wonderful part of the world, and we should be able to hold our heads up high. But I know I am not the only one who is struggling to be positive about this country of ours’ – I don’t like what we’ve become, and I am rather afraid for the future. At times I wonder why anyone should want to come to this country – then you remember just how horrendous life must be for someone to place themselves and their child in a small boat to try and cross the Channel. I am disgusted with a government using refugees as a distraction, stepping up the rhetoric against them. Worth reminding ourselves that we give asylum seekers £35 a week – so £5 a day – none of us could survive on £5 a day. Meanwhile, our Home Secretary earns £1000 an hour (on top of her ministerial salary) as advisor to a communications firm Viasat, a firm that supplies the Ministry of Defence. The fact that that’s OK, makes me ashamed to be British. On the other hand, one of the stories last weekend said that one of the boats had a woman in it, about to give birth. The story said that an ambulance was waiting for her, and she was transferred from the boat into the care of people who will care for her and her child. That gives me a glimmer of hope, that keeps the light burning – for the light does shine in the darkness, and the darkness has NOT overcome it.

Coming back locally – our bicentenary follow-up may not have been what we expected, but the fact that our celebrations, the celebration of our history, our heritage, our Christian forebears, our community – all these things have shown fruit in the way our community has faced Covid. The links between people, the trust, the knowledge, the faith, the sheer hard work of the last few months – there is a huge amount to be proud of. We mustn’t let the struggle and the darkness cover the light.

The apostle Paul is proud of his inheritance. “I myself am an Israelite, a descendant of Abraham, a member of the tribe of Benjamin.” An impeccable heritage. Paul is writing to the new Christians in Rome, many of them also of Jewish heritage – indeed they weren’t just of Jewish heritage, they were Jews. Christians, yes, but Jews too. Paul is reassuring them that this Jesus, this Messiah, has fulfilled the ancestral promises. Yes, he was not the Messiah they expected, but he is the Promised One all the same. It’s a huge claim to make.

Elsewhere Paul gives us his C.V. ; tent maker, student of Gamaliel, the greatest Jewish teacher of the day, as well as sort of lawyer and noted persecutor of the earliest Christians including Stephen. So when he says that Jesus came to fulfil the promises made over thousands of years to the Jews, he wants you to know that he knows of what he speaks.

But, he continues, just as Jesus came to save all those Jews who had doubted and been sinful against God’s Law, which after all was very difficult to keep, he had also come to save everyone else, the Gentiles, who had naturally been disobedient to God’s rule. Because, Paul argues, if everyone is a sinner, everyone can be saved. As Paul says elsewhere, with Christ there is not Jew or Greek, slave or free, even man or woman, because if everyone is a sinner, it follows that everyone can be saved, and is saved, through the love and forgiveness of God. He has shown mercy to all through the sacrifice of Christ, so we can all have hope with those first Christians. It is complicated, but reassuring as well.

We are not good at getting our heads round this idea that God is merciful to all – we want God to be merciful to us and people like us. That is not the same – God loves everyone, he is merciful to all. God loves the Home Secretary, God loves those who are frightened by people who are different, God – somehow – shows his mercy to people who hate, and fear, and attack. On the cross Jesus prayed for those who crucified – were crucifying – him. God does not love their evil, but he does love them. His love demands a response – a response by Jew, by Christians, by us. We know that when we are loved, we want to respond – we respond to the humans who love us, we must respond to the God who loves us.

We are called to love those who shout at us. In the Gospel reading Jesus has a debate with a noisy woman. We all know that parents will do anything to help their children, and this woman has a daughter who she believes is possessed of a demon. We don’t know what this means; it could be a mental illness, a physical challenge, but whatever it is, is serious. Just like the woman who ventures to touch the hem of Jesus’ garment in chapter nine of Matthew’s Gospel, so desperate is she for healing, so convinced that only he can help, this woman

dares to shout out in public that she needs his help. She is asking for help for a girl child, she is not a Jew, she is so desperate and yet brave that she will try to get help from this man however much she is socially condemned and even physically jostled.

The disciples are harassed. Send her away, they say. She keeps shouting after us. She is persistent, even rude, they say. Why should you listen to her? She is not one of us, she is a woman, she is interrupting and diverting attention from the true work. What Jesus says is disturbing, but he stops and speaks to her. Is this the point at which Jesus decides that he is sent for everyone, not just the Jews? Some people say that this is the first time he announces that he has come for everyone, Jew and Gentile alike. I'm not so sure. I think he is speaking to this woman in the spirit of debate, making her help him state that faith, her faith, that makes all the difference.

Jesus says that he is surprised to be asked to help her, that she is not of the house of Israel, that he has come to a group of people that does not include her and her daughter, that his message will be wasted on her. She does not deny that his message may well be for the Jews, but she says that even the crumbs of that message are enough to save her daughter.

Jesus greets her statements with the ultimate accolade. "Woman, great is your faith!" He admires her persistence, her understanding, her belief that faith in him, in what he has come to say and do is transforming, can change lives. This is immediately proved by her dearest wish being granted, her daughter is restored to health. We don't know how it happened, if her daughter and indeed she followed Jesus ever after, if this parent's faith transformed more than one or two lives in the short term.

So two readings that ask the big questions. Is faith in Jesus for everyone? Did his coming into our world make a difference then and now? Have I got the courage to ask for help despite social pressure to be quiet, to get on with life quietly accepting what comes? Have I got the faith to believe in God's love, in the face of a virus, in the face of economic collapse, in the face of struggle and despair.

Our world presents us with big questions. Do you remember those wonderful days when the only things to get stressed about were Brexit and Climate change? That were simple – 2020 is a year that, quite frankly, overwhelms.

In our own lives we have questions. Why do we, and those we love, often have to suffer? How can we hold onto hope in the face of illness, loss? Should we be

angry? Should we search harder for answers? How can we believe in a loving God when life at times can seem a bit unfair?

Paul wrote to the Christians in Rome about how everyone can receive God's forgiveness, not just the Jews or the gentiles, but as everyone has sinned, everyone can be saved. No one knows what he exactly meant, and it is perhaps only through faith and prayer, joining with others in worship, that we can get a glimpse of that God he promises.

If the story of the woman whose daughter is so miraculously and generously healed in Matthew's Gospel teaches us one thing, it is to have faith and persevere even when it seems unlikely, even impossible, to make a difference. She is rewarded for her faith with a healing, and her faith is recorded for a couple of thousand years.

This weekend is the 75 anniversary of VJ Day – the end of the War in the Far East. We can hardly face the horror of that conflict. Julie and I visited the National Memorial Arboretum last week, and spent time in the Far East Pavilion. The stories, the photos, what those men, women and children went through. And the unspeakable horror of two atomic bombs.

Twenty years ago, I did the funeral of an old lady in Suffolk. I never met her, but chatted to her daughter. It turned out that mum and dad had married early on in the War, when he came home from leave. I was shown the wedding photo – him a Suffolk farm worker now in uniform, her looking so proud. When he came on leave a few months later, their daughter was conceived. Then dad, like so many others in the East Anglian regiments, was posted to the Far East. He was captured, held prisoner, tortured, but somehow survived. At least, he survived physically. Mentally, he was a wreck – and in those days no one cared. The daughter said that her childhood memories were being grabbed from bed by her mum and locked in the downstairs cupboard where she'd be safe as dad stormed round the house, kitchen knife in hand, trying to defend himself against his Japanese foe. Mum would be trying to get the knife off him, trying to calm him down, loving him through the violence, the pain, the evil. If I remember right, dad took his own life while daughter was just a teenager – then her and mum had to survive and rebuild. Mum had never remarried, she had only ever loved one man, and she never stopped loving him. May they rest in peace, and rise in glory. Amen.