

SERMON – JAMES 3.1-12, MARK 8.27-38 – 12 SEPTEMBER 2021

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



Twenty years ago, on the 11th of September, I sat on a park bench in the Abbey Gardens in Bury St Edmund's. It was not an ordinary park bench, it was – according to the Borough Council's publicity – the world's first internet bench. In other words, it had one of those white plastic phone points, and you could plug your laptop in and go on line. We hadn't discovered wifi in those days. As it was "the world's first internet bench", and it was in the grounds of an abbey, the Sunday programme on Anglia TV had decided to do a piece about it – linking it with the monastic tradition of illuminated manuscripts. They needed a young, dynamic clergyman to front the piece – and, in those days, that was me. We had a Cathedral laptop, so on Tuesday September 11th I went to the bench to make sure I could get the technology to work. Work it did, and I sat there, in a beautiful park, watching the scenes unfolding from New York.

The children went to County Upper School in Bury. They came home and told us there had been a tannoy announcement at lunchtime telling all the American pupils, and there were quite a lot because of the bases around us, telling all the American pupils to report immediately to the school hall – and they were bussed away. Hannah said yesterday that she remembered they suddenly disappeared, and it was several weeks before they returned to class.

We had Choral Evensong as normal at 5.30, tried to find the words for prayer, then were locking up and a lady arrived. She was in floods of tears. Her son worked in the World Trade Centre, he had been late to work, and was alive. "I feel so guilty" she said. People kept arriving, needing space, needing to pray – and I think it was about 10 pm before we could finally lock the Cathedral and go home. We had some very busy days that week – and I was down to preach on Sunday. Not an easy sermon to write!



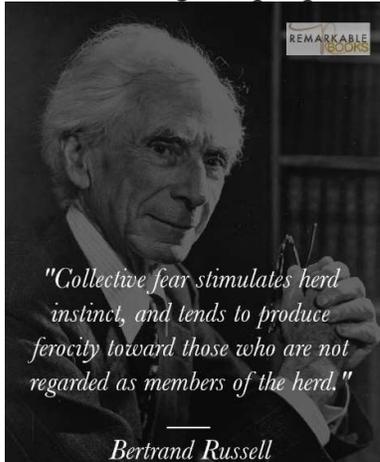
Over the next few months we, and so many churches, worked hard to bring communities together. We didn't have much interfaith work in Bury St Edmund's, but we built up the links we had and made new friendships. When we celebrated the Queen's Golden Jubilee the following year, in 2002, we made sure that our service was not just white and Christian. We had a Sikh boy from Ipswich who prayed the world peace prayer, we involved leaders of other faiths – we tried to make it more than tokenism, and I think we succeeded. We also made sure that all the Christian denominations were represented, because we weren't actually very good at doing that – and I do remember a stressful conversation with a Baptist Minister who wasn't going to attend because the Muslims were there, but he did, and we built some friendships. We learnt about each other and what we believed, and we had some excellent teachers – for a few years at any rate, we responded to the hatred and violence with love and understanding.

Here we are 20 years later – and I'm not sure what to say. The violence of that day led to retaliation and war. We've had terrorist attacks since – those of 7 July 2005 made more of an impression on me as the bus attack on Tavistock Square was just round the corner from Great Ormond Street Hospital, and some of their hospital staff were injured and killed. Over the last few weeks we've seen the chaos as we've abandoned Afghanistan to the Taliban, and we're being warned by the head of MI5 that the number of terrorist attacks is likely to increase.



Listening to Jon Sopel on Friday's PM discussing the anniversary in America, he commented on the introspection of the American people, on the way people have come in on themselves – put the barriers up to protect. Our country is also full of barriers and introspection – the rise of security (cameras, gates, protection), the decline of community, the fact that communities only deal with people like them, the whole rhetoric of push-back. The country that welcomed Priti Patel's parents when they escaped from Uganda in the 1960s is now a very different country. Emma Raducanu has a father from Rumania and a mother from China – they came to this country when she was two. These days we'll celebrate her success, but if her parents arrived now, we'd probably send them back. We have a crisis in social care – partly because the last decade has seen us under-pay and under-value the people we need to care, we have made it known to those with a different colour skin or a different accent that they are not

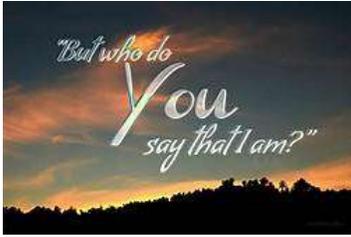
welcome here and, surprise surprise, we have people in desperate need of care – and a shortage of people willing to care for them.



Someone put this Bertrand Russell quote on facebook – “collective fear stimulates herd instinct, and tends to produce ferocity towards those who are not regarded as members of the herd.” How right he is ... “collective fear stimulates herd instinct, and tends to produce ferocity towards those who are not regarded as members of the herd.”



I mustn't just blame society or the government – I've been in Derby five years and have made no real attempt to get to know people of other communities. And part of it is fear. Talking to Peter Robinson, the Cathedral Dean, on Thursday, he was saying how the biggest barrier he finds to inter-faith work in this city is the fact that so many of the more evangelical churches will not engage. He was asking me, as Diocesan Ecumenical Officer, about the relationships between different churches across this County – and I had to tell him that in the last month Derbyshire Churches Together has finally died. I've spent four years working with a handful of others to keep the County Ecumenical body alive, but without the support of the separate denominations, we have failed. Working together is not seen as important.



In the gospel we have Peter's wonderful response to Jesus. "Who do you say that I am?" "You are the Messiah" – it can't get more positive than that. I have followed you, I have listened to you, I have watched you, I have prayed with you, I have prayed about you - "You are the Messiah".

I hope that is a response we've all made – and if you haven't, or you're unsure, or you're wobbling, or you just want a chat – please, please come and talk. This relationship with Christ is vitally important, the declaration that we accept his love, his Lordship, we recognise him as our Lord and Saviour – we are all called to be committed people.

But it is not just that one commitment, that one declaration – it is a lifetime of journeying with Christ. And it's not easy.



Jesus' response is to talk about what that declaration will mean. It is not just a happy celebration, you have faith isn't it wonderful, it is a talk about suffering and rejection and death. That's not what Peter wants, and he pushes back. Jesus is quite clear with him – faith is not easy, it demands work, the taking of the cross, it takes effort.

If I think where my journey has gone in the last twenty years, I do wonder. If you ask me what the next twenty years hold, I have no idea. I do know that even when I have been most afraid, I have found myself held by someone who understands my fear, I have learned that perfect love defeats our fear. I know that none of us journey alone – God is with us, and we share the work and ministry of building the Kingdom of God with many, many other wonderful people.



My daughter was never good at getting up and being ready for school., but yesterday morning at 8 am she was on BBC Radio Leeds telling the presenter exactly why, as a GP, she believes we need to do social care better. The girl who, aged 14, was in a school RE class when there was a tannoy announcement about her fellow pupils needing to return to the protection of their base, she was telling Yorkshire why we need to value the people who care, and why we need to value the people who need care. Being my daughter, she was not mincing her words or making it easy, or saying what the listeners to BBC Radio Leeds will necessarily want to hear – and I hope I am allowed a bit of parental pride.

This is the World Peace Prayer

Lead us from death to life, from false-hood to truth,
Lead us from despair to hope, from fear to trust.
Lead us from hate to love, from war to peace;
Let peace fill our hearts, let peace fill our world, let peace fill our universe.
And may it begin with me.
Amen.