

Sermon – Sunday 17th November 2019 – 9.30 am

I have spent much of this week thinking about how our faith impacts on our daily life, in small and not-so-small ways. One of the ideas that came up in a discussion in Morning Prayer was whether we wake up each morning and offer the day to God. I wonder if that is something you do? And what difference it makes if and when you do.

I was also involved in an interesting discussion about giving to those who are destitute. Many of us will have had that experience when sitting on a train in a station of someone getting on, giving a little talk about the difficulty of their situation, and then passing around a pot asking for money. How do we respond? In this day and age, if we do give the person money, how are we viewed by our fellow passengers? And how do we feel if we don't?

The scriptures give us one clear answer – just look at the sixth chapter of Luke's gospel: "Give to everyone who begs from you." And yet I am probably not alone in having listened to organisations who work extensively with those who are homeless offering convincing explanations for why that may not be the best response. They always recommend making our donations through recognised charities that seek to support the homeless. I have a friend who is currently travelling in Africa on a work trip. He was describing his own discomfort in Addis Ababa where young children beg on the streets and yet you are warned that it may be dangerous to get your wallet out and offer them money. His colleague, who lives in South Africa, explained that his approach is to give generously to charities.

Whatever our own approach to this kind of situation, we probably never stop feeling uncomfortable when we come face to face with poverty, homelessness and need. And I wonder, too, whether we ever really stop asking ourselves whether what we choose to do is right and is enough. And perhaps that isn't a bad starting point for a Christian life. For what it means to be a follower of Christ. For how our faith impacts on our daily lives.

When I first read this morning's gospel reading, with my head bubbling away with ideas about the small ways in which we live out our faith, I felt like I'd been thrown something of a curved ball. Instead of guidance on daily living, I found myself faced with Jesus speaking about the future destruction of the Temple, the signs the time was coming and the persecutions that would be suffered. Jesus at his most apocalyptic doesn't really feel like daily life.

And when we are faced with these kinds of passages, we really do need to be quite careful. Careful to consider their context. And careful in our interpretations. While there are those who have confidently interpreted various events to be sure signs of the end times, they have not yet proven to be correct, and if the gospel is good news, it cannot surely be intended as a weapon of fear.

Yet there is so much in this morning's readings that might just help us in our daily living. So let's tread carefully and see what we can find. The first point to make is that apocalyptic language was not new to Jesus's listeners - the Book of Daniel is perhaps the best known example within the Hebrew scriptures. Just as we would not hear the words "once upon a time" and assume that we were about to be given a factually accurate account of events, so no-one would expect apocalyptic writing to offer a description of exactly what might happen. Rather the purpose of apocalyptic literature was to encourage the faithful to place their trust in God, even in challenging circumstances.

Here, in the twenty-first chapter of Luke's gospel, Jesus's future is becoming clearer. Foreseeing his own betrayal and death, it is hardly surprising that he desperately wanted his followers to know where to place their trust. To remind them that God remained close to them even when Jesus himself had gone away.

There is another context to bear in mind too. It is a theme throughout the scriptures that God is not to be found only in the Temple. During their wanderings in the desert in the Exodus, the people of Israel became aware that God was with them wherever they were. Luke's gospel was written after the physical destruction of the Temple by the Romans in AD70. It is quite likely that this context will have given added significance to Jesus's words. The message of trusting in God during times of persecution will have felt stronger than ever.

Of course our own times are perhaps a little less dramatic. We may find ourselves increasingly concerned about secularisation, wondering the extent to which Christian values are embedded within our culture, and the extent to which the practice of Christianity is marginalised, but we continue to be free to worship and practise our faith without fear. But the words of Jesus still speak to us.

Let's think once again of the way our faith impacts on our daily lives. How is it that we make our choices and decisions? What are the factors that influence us? Jesus may have been speaking into times more dramatic than our own when he spoke of being led astray, but it is surely valid to ask ourselves which voices we are hearing in our daily decision-making. We are bombarded with advertising on posters, radio and television; we are surrounded by people who are often not shy to share their opinions about how we should live. Ensuring that we remain connected to God's call is not always easy. Finding ways to stand firm to what we believe and recognise those who are speaking the truth is important. It's surely part of the reason why we come to church and make friendships here.

And while we are not currently facing the wars and strife of which this passage speaks, nevertheless there is a recognition that life contains its share of challenges. And the promise is of God's presence throughout. No matter how hard things are, God continues to be with us, and we are called to remain true to God.

If the apocalyptic nature of the Gospel reading presents one kind of challenge, the clear, unambiguous instruction in the epistle presents another. It is hard to hear much in the way of compassion in Paul's warnings against idleness, and while this may guide us towards a good work ethic in our daily lives, we can perhaps think of circumstances in which the toil and labour of which Paul speaks may not be possible for some people. And once again context is so important. If we think of early Christian communities set up on the principles set out in the Acts of the Apostles, where member shared all they had and there was no private ownership, it is easy to realise that this is a situation that might be abused. When Paul spoke against idleness, he really was speaking of those who were taking advantage of communities that were seeking to live out Christian way of life. His desire was to encourage members of those communities to grow in love for one another and for God, not to take advantage.

So how does our faith impact on our daily lives? I am cautious about suggesting that the Bible provides us with neat answers or a clear rule book – it was never written for that purpose. It does,

though, contain material on which to reflect. Ideas to challenge, support and encourage. A life of faith is not an easy ride. We can't really get away without thinking and engaging in the world around us. The promise, though, is of God's presence. We draw closer to that presence through our prayer, worship and spiritual reflections. And while God's presence cannot guarantee an easy path, we are always held in a love that is beyond measure.

Amen