

9th February 2025

Fourth Sunday before Lent

Sermon by Bishop Richard Harries

St Mary's Barnes, 10 am

First Reading: 1 Corinthians 15.1-11:

Gospel: Luke 5.1-11

It is very understandable if you are feeling somewhat disillusioned by the Church of England at the moment. The resignation of the Archbishop of Canterbury and pressure on the Archbishop of York to do so, for safeguarding failures, plus the resignation of the Bishop of Liverpool has badly damaged us. So too has the continuing split in the church over gay relationships. So perhaps the first thing to be said is that from the first the church has been a flawed institution. You have only to read the letters in the New Testament to see that it too was a church which had its quarrels, wrong doers and failures. The point is that the church, made up of human beings, is flawed and our claim is not that we are perfect, or necessarily better than others, but that despite our frailty and flaws we are held in the love of God. Whatever our faults Christ holds us to himself and will continue to do so, in this life and beyond. But as Paul says we have this treasure in earthen vessels.

Then there is an even more serious reason for concern than current failures in the leadership and that is the kind of society in which we are living. It is a society in which most people have no time for the church and in which the majority of young people say they have no religion. We are a minority in a society which is indifferent or hostile to the Christian faith. So where, as we prepare to receive a new Rector can we take some encouragement?

First, as some distinguished historians have pointed out in recent years, Larry Siedentop and Tom Holland for example, what we most

cherish about Western civilisation is due to the Christian faith. At the heart of our society still is the principle that every individual matters and is of equal value and worth. That did not just come out of the blue. It is the historical legacy of the New Testament built into our laws and institutions. From the first this conviction was expressed in looking after the weak, sick and poor. When in the fourth century, the pagan Julian became emperor and tried to turn the empire back to paganism, he admitted he had nothing to offer that compared with the care which the church offered to widows, orphans and the sick. It is that concern for the vulnerable that lead Christians over the centuries to found hospitals and in recent years to pioneer good palliative care.

Our concern for the individual in our society is a result of the Christian witness that in the eyes of God we are all of equal value and worth. This poses a question to our society. If it abandons the foundation of our values, if we cut their roots, what is it going to put in its place?

Secondly, we can take heart from the heroic witness of Christians down the ages, and indeed in other parts of the church today. Almost every day in the church calendar we remember some saint or martyr. Last week for example, we remember Anskar, the 9th century missionary to Denmark and Sweden, Gilbert the founder of the only English religious order in the 12th century and the martyrs of Japan in the 16th. As a result of the mission of St Francis Xavier at that time there were several thousand baptised Christians, but the political rulers turned against them and 26 men and women were mutilated then crucified near Nagasaki. It was this kind of heroism that enabled the Christian faith to capture the heart and mind of the Roman world in the first three centuries. Entirely peacefully, without any positions of power, despite successive fierce persecutions, the church made its way until in 312 the Emperor Constantine himself was converted. These are not just examples to us of those who lived and died for their faith, they live with us in the Communion of Saints, the mystical body of Christ that unites heaven and earth.

Thirdly, and above all, we can take strength and joy in our wonderful Christian faith that we share. There was a time when people took it for granted, it was just part of the culture. Now this is no longer the case we can see more clearly what an amazing, glorious thing it is that we believe. When T. S. Eliot was converted to the Christianity in 1927 he welcomed the new hostile situation in which Christians now found themselves, for he thought it released the Christian faith from what had burdened it since the 18th century, namely being a badge of respectability for the English middle classes. We can now prize and exult in Christian truth for its own glorious sake. We can stand and say the creed with all the exaltation of a national anthem before a rugby match.

This life is not a tale of sound and fury signifying nothing. There is a meaning and purpose behind it, which we can discover. There is a wise and good purpose at the heart of the universe. This wise and good purpose has been made known to us in the people of the Hebrew scriptures culminating in the person of Jesus, crucified, risen, glorified and present through his Spirit in our hearts.

Today's first reading is one of the most important in the whole New Testament. In it Paul says 'I passed on to you what was passed on to me' These are technical words for passing on a tradition, and what this indicates is that we have here a message that goes back to the very first days of the church. As he wrote:

For I handed on to you as of first importance what I in turn had received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures ⁴ and that he was buried and that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures ⁵ and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. ⁶ Then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers and sisters at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have died.^[b] ⁷ Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles. ⁸ Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me. ⁹ For I am the least of the apostles, unfit to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. ¹⁰ But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace toward me has not been in vain.

Every day the news shock us with some terrible story, another knife killing, another massacre, another accident. It is into this world of strife and sorrow that God comes in the person of Jesus, and in him crucified, risen, glorified the back of evil has been broken, the sting of death overcome and life opened out to eternity.

The treasure we have is a staggering, mind blowing truth, an amazing story to tell, one whose overriding importance can and ought to shock us into seeing everything differently. It is indeed good news in a suffering world. We have the treasure in earthen vessels, ourselves, but we have treasure.

At the moment, wider society does not want listen. We are like Peter in today's Gospel who when told to put out into the deep replied that they had been out fishing all night and caught nothing. But then he did do what Jesus asked and found his nets overflowing with a large catch. One of the reasons that the church remembered that story is that it is not just about fishing but about the mission of the church. We can feel we have got nowhere, made no impact. But still we are urged to put out into the deep again, into the deep of God. And who knows, God in his own good time or out of time may once again fill the church with his people. Our vocation is to remain faithful whether the times are propitious or unpropitious. Our time is a difficult one, the culture is unsympathetic, but this should all the more should drive us back to cherish the amazing glorious truth that has touched us. At the heart of the universe is a wise and loving power who in Christ has come close to us and who now stirs in our hearts. His grace is daily available to help us grow in love for him and one another and in this way prepare us for the bliss of an eternal life that surpasses anything we can imagine.