

## **Trinity 20**

### **St Mary's Barnes**

#### **Isaiah 53, 4-end; Mark 10, 35-45**

Fundamental to our faith is the belief that Christ came to save us and that his death is key to bringing this about. I don't know about you but I have struggled for 65 years to make sense of this and am still never sure I have. Today's readings contain two crucial texts on the theme so there is no escaping the obligation to preach on it and for all of us to think about this deep truth and try to enter into it with more understanding. In the Gospel, after a rebuke to James and John for self-seeking Jesus told his followers they must live a life of service, adding 'For the Son of Man did not come to be served but to serve and give his life as a ransom for many.' It is a vivid image. We have become familiar again in recent decades with ransom demands from terrorists and pirates off the coast of Africa. People have been captured, and for their freedom a price has to be paid. In the early centuries of the church when Christians first started to think systematically about this issue the ransom metaphor was the one they mainly used. Yes, Christ has liberated us and it was at the cost of his death, but then they got in a bit of a muddle when they speculated about the role of the devil in capturing us in the first place. And this brings out a fundamental point. All language about God is as misleading as it is true. When we use an example or image we always have to ask in which way is this true when used about God and in what way is it false.

Today's first reading, chapter 53 of the book of Isaiah is arguably the most influential of all passages in the Old Testament on Christian understanding. It is about someone who suffers for us. Its words are deeply moving and have entered our culture. 'He is despised and rejected of men..surely he hath borne our griefs and carried our sorrows...he was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for

our iniquities...with his stripes we are healed...he bare the sins of many'

There is a profound truth here but it can be stated in a way which makes it morally intolerable. It is sometimes said that because of human sinfulness we all deserve to die eternally, but Christ has died in our place, accepted our punishment and those who believe this personally will go to heaven. I think such a view should be strongly rejected on moral grounds. Once again valuable imagery has been pushed too far in too literal a manner.

So I am going to start with us human beings, where we are. We are all born with a basic self-interest. This is essential to our survival. Unless we had enough will to live to reach for our mother's milk, and learn to look after ourselves, we simply could not survive. So there is nothing essentially wrong with a basic will to survive and look after oneself. But as we grow up of course, we encounter other people with their needs and interests. So we have to be socialised, we have to learn to take those others into account. This, as we all know is a long, hard, life-time process. What seems to happen is that we get stuck. We fail to grow in that process. At its worst there are those who think only of themselves and are ruthless in their dealings with others. At its best there are others who are amazing in their care for others, say parents looking after a severely handicapped child. Most of us I suppose are somewhere in between, and as always shaped by the society around us-ours being late capitalism driven largely by self-interest. But not entirely for as the neighbourly kindness shown in the first wave of Covid revealed, there is still a spring of kindness there.

From a Christian point of view we are here to grow, to mature. We have been made in the image of God, able to think and choose and pray and love. And we are called to grow into the Divine likeness. That is why we are on this earth. To grow, to grow in the love of God and others so that we become transparent to the divine beauty coming to dwell within us. But we get stuck in that process. The growth gets

halted. We become stunted. We become imprisoned in our selves, locked away. William Blake wrote

If the doors of perception were cleansed everything would appear as it is: infinite. For man has closed himself up so he sees all things through the narrow chinks of his cavern.

Christ came to cleanse the doors of perception ;to open us up so we no long see through the narrow chinks of our cavern; to hold the door of our prison open so that we face the flood of the light of his presence in the world about us, in others and in ourselves.

He did this quite simply by taking our human nature and coming amongst us in his Son to invite us into his presence. So it was that Jesus came preaching the kingdom of God and welcoming people into it. He proclaimed God's rule and challenged people to live under it. As we know he made a particular point of welcoming those on the margins of society. His message proved too radical for the powerful and they contrived to have him done away with by an extreme form of torture. All his followers, except the women, betrayed, denied or deserted him. But after his resurrection their whole outlook was radically transformed. They saw that this was not a failed prophet but God himself searching them out to bring them to himself. In particular they realised that his love for them was so much he had been prepared to go to the death for us. It had cost him his life. This was the price of it. It was not a cost paid to anyone whether God or the devil, but the cost of it. As a result they had a new sense of oneness with God, a sense that they were sharing in the filial relationship which Jesus has eternally with the one he called Abba, Father. It is not surprising therefore that attempts to understand this have been called theories of At-one-moment-atonement. It is important to note that there has never been any one authorised doctrine of the atonement-just a number of theories-developed metaphors or images in an attempt to understand it better. So if we ask, what then did God do for our salvation, then as Austin Farrer put it.

In the saving action of the incarnation God came all lengths to meet us, and dealt humanly with human creatures....He came among them, bringing his kingdom, and he let events take their human course. He set the divine life in human neighbourhood. Men discovered it in struggling with it and were captured by it in crucifying it. What could be simpler? And what more divine?

We are called to grow, to grow into the likeness of God. And that process is not halted. We are not stuck and stunted. We are not trapped in our own cavern of self preoccupation; not locked in our own prison of self-regard but freed, released. Christ is there always holding the door open into the light of the divine presence. If we are feeling bad about ourselves, he is still there. However many often we turned away his arms are open. Always bearing with us, always bearing our faults and failures, welcoming us. So again in words of Farrer.

He takes my head between his hands and turns my face to his to make me smile at him. And though I struggle and hurt those hands-for they are human, though divine, human and scarred with nails-though I hurt them, they do not let me go until he has smiled me into smiling.

So, to that God who smiles at us, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, be glory now and evermore.