

Where is Your Faith?: Sermon Preached at St John's, Devizes, Sunday 20th February 2022 (The 2nd Sunday before Lent)

Readings – Revelation 4; Luke 8:22–25

'Where is your faith?'

I think we all know by now that the world's Number 1 tennis player, Novak Djokovic, refuses to take a coronavirus vaccine. For many weeks now, this has been one of the most reported news stories all over the world. What I find odd is that nobody asks why his views seem to matter so much. He's a great tennis player, but not exactly one of our era's great minds. So why do we care what he thinks about any subject not related to a tennis court?

The Church is considered irrelevant. More than that, Church is deeply insecure about its supposed lack of relevance, and spends a huge amount of time desperately trying to be relevant, sometimes making itself look stupid in the process. Yet, is it the Church that has a problem, or is it a wider society that turns professional sportspeople into oracles of wisdom on every subject?

Now, let me read you an excerpt from the work of another prominent figure in the debate about coronavirus vaccines:

“Shorty I'mma only tell you this once, you the illest
And for your loving I'mma die hard like Bruce Willis
You got spark, you, you got spunk
You, you got something all the girls want
You're like a candy store
And I'm a toddler”

This is the lyrical genius of the rapper Nicki Minaj, one of the world's most successful musicians. Last September, Minaj tweeted to her 24 million followers that her cousin's friend became impotent as a result of the vaccine. Since then her ever shifting views on vaccination have been the subject of endless media debate. The same society that considers the Church irrelevant obsesses about what vapid celebrities think about matters of medical science.

None of this is to excuse the Church's self-importance. It has been the architect of many of its own problems. This week, I read news reports of another disastrously managed safeguarding case of the period between 1960s and the 1990s. I can see why people lost faith in the Church. But where did their faith go?

Once people had faith in political leaders, or in trade unionists or captains of industry, or in thinkers and self-help gurus. All of these people squandered people's faith as determinedly as the Church did.

At the moment, the professional upper-middle-classes still seem to have faith in one thing: science and scientists. Indeed the dominant religion of the English bourgeoisie has shifted from the Church of England to the church of experts. That doesn't, however, translate into the rest of society. If anything, the way in which questioning anything presented in scientific terms is treated as ridiculous and laughable by the best off and best educated seems to provoke a backlash from other sections of society, as the rise of anti-vaccine sentiment shows.

While social media and fragmentation of the mass media doubtless play a role, the crisis in faith in science has deeper causes. We, the public, are another contributor to the problem, by asking too much of science, asking it to answer questions that are matters of ethics or political philosophy. Scientists themselves have, however, often colluded in the politicisation of their profession, something social media has made clear as scientists argue among themselves in full public view. It has become too easy to guess a scientist's position on the left-right spectrum from the way they speak about their field of expertise.

With the last pillar of traditional authority crumbling, it seems the only people left with any moral authority in Western societies are stars of sport and entertainment, the Novaks and the Nickis. God help us all.

God help us all, indeed. On a stormy night in the Middle East 2,000 years ago, He asked them, "Where is your faith?" He asks us this still.

In our own stormy times, our faith must surely rest not in human ideas, or human institutions, or human learning, all of which must always necessarily be flawed, but in God who is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Given the way the Church sometimes behaves, it would be tempting to say that our faith must rest in God alone and not the institutional Church. Yet without institutions we are nothing but a society of disconnected individuals. The Church is flawed but it is also the body of Christ. Only in our bodies can we serve and love others. Jesus himself called the apostles, and called the forty, and sent them out as a group with specific instructions and a shared vision.

We do not face a choice between flawed institutions and perfect ones, but between flawed institutions and a society of isolates, all too susceptible to misinformation by the loudest voices and all too capable of being whipped up into a mob.

The institutional expression of Christianity on the ground is the parish church. Thank God it is, at least in the Church of England, still required to serve everyone in the parish, to serve people of all faiths and people of no faith, not just those gathered inside church on Sunday mornings. But to make that vision work of an inclusive, non-discriminatory, serving Church, we need those of you who are in church on Sunday mornings to give the institutional Church strength.

I supported the lockdowns, as the only way we had before vaccinations to save hundreds of thousands of lives. Yet, I was also aware, right from the start, that lockdowns would come with terrible social costs. The winners of the society we have created over the last two years are big international tech companies, institutional investors, and those with residential property portfolios. The losers have been the young, those whose income depends on people being physically present such as performing artists, and the voluntary organisations whose income and participation have been devastated.

Needless to say, the Church is one of those voluntary organisations which has been financially devastated by the pandemic. Some of you are not in a position to give more than you currently do – and that is fine. Some of you support other good organisations, which will also be in a difficult position and you might want to help them as well as the Church, and that is good too. But, quite frankly, we need your help. Our deficit has ballooned under pandemic conditions to almost £3,000 per month because both our giving income and our other income collapsed during and after the lockdowns. Yet, as the Rector rightly told us last week, God has given us everything we need to survive in this parish.

No storm lasts forever – something that should resonate with us powerfully after the weather we've experienced this week. As the storm of coronavirus subsides, there are huge opportunities for the Church. There are newcomers, here this morning, and as I speak to colleagues around the country, in churches generally at the moment – and you are very welcome. There will be a rebound in interest in the Church as people seek community and meaning after the experiences of the last few years. More profoundly than that, there will be a rebound in traditional forms of faith because the Novaks and Nickis of this world aren't credible repositories of our faith.

“Where is your faith?” I hope it is in God, and in His church. And this Church, your own parish church of St John's, now needs your support to be in a position to gather in the harvest that the Lord will provide as the storm we have been living through subsides.

Now to the only wise God our saviour, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, be glory and majesty, dominion and power, both now and ever. Amen.