

The Paradox of Christianity: Sermon Preached on 1st October 2023 (17th Sunday after Trinity)

Preached at St John's, Devizes

Readings – Philippians 2.1-13; Matthew 20.1-16

“And they argued with one another...”

In the name of the Father...

If you've been paying attention to the readings in Church on recent Sundays, you'll have noticed that we haven't had the Palm Sunday Gospel – unsurprisingly in early autumn. So it's a little startling to find this week's Gospel catapulting us into the middle of Holy Week. We don't read Matthew's Gospel entirely in sequence during the year, so we've skipped over Christ's final journey through Judaea and Jericho, and find Jesus in the Temple arguing with the chief priests and elders.

The religious leaders are playing what they think are clever word games. But although they present themselves as having power and authority over the Jewish people, what this exposes is how afraid they are of public opinion. We also know that they rightly fear the Romans. So they're performing little verbal dances, determined to get one over on Jesus, but also aware that saying the wrong thing could enrage either the Empire, or the crowds who admire this popular, if strange, preacher.

By the time Matthew's Gospel was written down in this form, perhaps forty years after Holy Week, the pointlessness of these games of had been brutally exposed. In the year 70 the Romans destroyed the Temple, halfway through a brutal eight-year Jewish revolt which ended, inevitably, with a Roman victory. The chief priests and elders in Jerusalem were absolutely not capable of managing the relationship between an all-powerful Empire demanding obedience and a fractious and resentful Jewish Palestinian society. They were out of their depth.

I'm afraid the word games and meaningless hair-splitting remind me rather of the politics of our own time. While it's easy to blame our leaders for that, like the Jerusalem Temple authorities of Jesus' time, they live in fear of fickle public opinion—the opinion of us and people like us—and the evident enjoyment the population takes in a bit of mob anger. At the same time, the long-term mega trends of the modern world, be it galloping technology, migration, climate change, or whatever, seem as beyond our leaders as the ever-rising tensions between Roman power and Jewish resentment were for the clerical gentlemen at the Temple. Perhaps it's an inevitable part of the human condition that rulers spend much effort on irrelevancies they can control while ignoring the real problems that they possibly can't.

Now, here's a point that's easy to miss in all this. It is very obvious from this exchange that Jesus can play these political word games like a pro. He puts the chief priests and elders in their box with a calculatedly sharp answer, as He does so often. But Jesus isn't interested in playing these games for too long. While the religious authorities are desperate to stay on the right side of public opinion, Jesus already seems to be aware that it will turn against Him, and soon.

This is where we see the magnificent paradox that sits at the heart of the Christian faith. Christ has already warned His followers, in Matthew chapter 16, so not all that long before these events, that anyone who tried to save their life would lose it, but anyone who lost their life for His sake would save it. When we lose our lives for Christ's sake we save them; it's only because Christ died on the Cross that eternal life is open to us.

This morning's Epistle reading is essentially a long meditation on that paradox. It comes from St. Paul's letter to the Philippians, and is considered one of the most beautiful pieces of Paul's writing. I rarely do this, but I honestly recommend that you take a quiet five minutes at home to read it and soak it in. In this passage, which may originally have been a very early Christian hymn, Paul reminds us that Jesus, was not just a potentially canny political operator, but God incarnate. He could have defeated the Temple authorities and the Romans at will—but that wasn't His mission.

As we're coming to the end of Jesus' public ministry with this morning's Gospel reading, let's remember what happened immediately before it began, when Satan tempted Jesus with worldly power. Christ's mission wasn't to establish a godly state, but to give Himself up to a terrible death. But although the Temple authorities and even eventually the Romans were defeated, Jesus is remembered as one of history's most significant figures two thousand years later, followed by more than two billion people. That was not as a result of seizing power, but allowing himself to be crushed by power. And in doing that, Christ passed through death to Resurrection, and opened the way to eternal life for all who follow Him

Another lesson I'd like to draw from this morning's readings is that we should look for God to be at work through those whom absolutely nobody expects. John the Baptist was a marginal figure living out in the desert, dressed in animal skins, eating locusts and wild honey, and with a tendency to speak his mind even if it offended people. Perhaps not the sort of person you would take to some delicate negotiations taking place over a long dinner at the home of that smooth Roman governor, Pontius Pilate. Neither was his cousin Jesus exactly from the smart set of First Century Palestine, with his artisan background and strong regional accent. The reaction of many on hearing that a great teacher and healer, who might even be a prophet, came from Nazareth—of all places—was to ask. "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" And as for St Paul—even his closest companions thought he was a bad-tempered weirdo!

God is a God of surprises, and seems to delight in undoing any certainties we have about how He operates in His universe, or calls to be set apart for His purposes.

I'm not going to pretend that this is a vintage time either in our own Church of England, or for Christianity across the Western world. We are not overburdened with charismatic prophets, or wise fatherly or motherly shepherds of the Church, and we are not even blessed with too many smooth political operators. I think our bishops spend too much time on irrelevancies they can control, because they have no answers to the mega-trends that have seen the Church

decline in the West even as it has grown globally. The irrelevancies include political interventions that nobody listens to unless they already agree with them, whether they're liberal statements on the asylum system or conservative statements on gay marriage. Perhaps, though, I ought to be careful not to offend either the religious authorities or public opinion, at a sensitive moment in my clerical career when I am coming to the end of my curacy and need a parish.

I do want to say that I have great faith in the renewal of the Church in this country and – call me a fool if you will – hope even for our own dear Church of England! One thing I'm sure about is that renewal will come from unlikely and unexpected sources.

I wish to finish with a broader point—we should sit relatively lightly to what we think we know about how God works in the world, because human beings in this physical, material universe can only have a very limited picture of who God is and what He is about. Even His closest disciples mostly misunderstood God when He was, in the person of Jesus Christ, eating breakfast with Him every morning. We should expect God to do the unexpected, as in that first Holy Week when instead of taking power or wooing the crowds, he humbled Himself to death on the Cross, and in doing so destroyed our death.

And now to that God, who is Father, Son, and Holy Ghost, be ascribed all might, majesty, dominion, and power, as is most justly His due, now and forevermore. Amen.