

The Sermon – “Don’t be afraid” - preached on Sunday 21 June 2020 by Lay Minister Tony Lemon

Which command do you think is repeated most often in the Bible? According to the Biblical scholar Tom Wright it is ‘Don’t be afraid’ or ‘have no fear’, as it is rendered in some translations. We find one or other phrase three times in our Gospel reading this morning. It is a salutary admonition in present times, when all of us must have felt some fear for ourselves and for those closest to us as the terrible reality of the coronavirus became clear: a fear which has perhaps begun to ebb away as we become used to the conditions of lockdown and, watching the daily statistics, began to feel that the worst is over – yet still feeling apprehension as scientists continue to talk about the dangers of a second wave. And now in the past few days there is another, very different reason to fear for the future: as the Black Lives Matter campaign has spread like wildfire from the US to Britain and many other countries, there is the fear of violent far right reaction and, more generally, of increasing social polarisation as issues are oversimplified, passions kindled and tempers aroused.

Jesus was telling his followers not to be afraid in the context of probable persecution: the authorities will be after them, and they will suffer physical and emotional violence. His justification for saying that they need not be afraid is not that God will look after them, although he does say that eventually, but rather that the patience, perseverance and courage of the disciples will in the end emerge into the light: truth will out, justice will prevail, even if not before they have died in serving their Lord. Those they should really fear were the forces that battled for their souls. God was not to be feared, because he loved and cared for every one of his creatures, even for the sparrows who were sold so cheaply. God is the one they do not have to fear: they can trust him with their lives, their souls, with everything. This is, in short, a call to his disciples for ultimate, unfearing, trusting faith.

It is a sharp challenge, and it becomes sharper as Jesus continues, recognising that his message will bring division, with some of the most challenging words in the Bible: ‘Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth; I have not come to bring peace but a sword.’

At first this startles us – what price those other famous words from Isaiah and Micah about changing swords into ploughshares? And it gets worse, as Jesus says that he came to divide families – ‘a man from his father, a daughter from her mother’ and so on. What can we make of this, which seems so contrary to the Christian message of peace and love, a love that for most people finds its most profound expression within their own families? Elsewhere in the New Testament we can find plenty about caring for one another within the family. So what do these stern and uncomfortable words mean? They are certainly capable of abuse. There have been churchmen who have neglected their own dependants and spent all their time on what they saw as ‘the Lord’s work’, just as many working in secular occupations have prioritised work at the expense of their families – Charles Dickens and Enid Blyton are among famous figures accused of this. Some strict Christian

denominations have literally divided families in the most tragic way: in the village where my grandmother lived in Norfolk the coming of the exclusive branch of the Plymouth Brethren meant that believers could not even share meals with non-believers in their own family.

Jesus clearly cannot intend his words to be interpreted in such ways. First, we have to make the usual caveat about the exaggerated force with which messages were commonly delivered in Biblical times: they would not have been taken literally by those who heard them. In using the words he does, Jesus is quoting from the Old Testament, as he often does – from Micah – where the prophet talks about the terrible divisions that would always occur when God does something new. Jesus is using language that would be familiar to the Jews of his day: they believed that one of the features of the Day of the Lord, the day when God would break into history, would be the division of families. It is as if Jesus is saying ‘The end you have always been waiting for has come’. Shorn of its sharpness, what Jesus’ words effectively recognise is that when God acts to rescue his people, there will always be those who declare that they don’t need rescuing, that they are comfortable as they are. In affluent societies like our own there are, not surprisingly, more such people. It is human nature to prefer comfort to challenge. Sharp words were, in the context of the Jews in biblical times, needed to arouse people.

In our own cultural context the sharpness of Jesus’ approach here meets little sympathy: it brings to mind those men – it always seemed to be men, and we rarely see them now – who stood with billboards pronouncing that the end of the world was nigh. They were, to the vast majority, a source of amusement and derision. In today’s secular society, if we are to have any chance of convincing people of the ongoing relevance of the Christian faith, our approach has to be based on the collective and individual actions and examples of the Church and those like ourselves who make up the church.

At the present time we face more than enough challenges to take us away from our comfort zone – challenges that it is difficult to avoid, much as we might wish to. Brexit brought us the challenge of deep polarisation of views in our society, a polarisation which did indeed divide many families. These divisions have been much less prominent in recent months as containing effects of the coronavirus has been our over-riding concern. But now we have a new source of polarisation, as the police killing of George Floyd in the United States has led to protest in many countries including our own. The speed with which this has spread clearly shows that this one incident has lit a tinderbox of resentment that just needed a single spark to set it alight, touching on the deep anger and frustration of many black people who have experienced injustice in their own families and communities. The result is demonstrations intended by their organisers to be peaceful but which have in some cases turned violent, and which certainly pose a major health threat in current conditions, together with strident demands to get rid of many statues, not only those of slave traders like Edward Colston and imperialists like Cecil Rhodes but many revered figures from Gladstone to Churchill. Predictably this scenario plays into the hands of far-right extremists. More

seriously, I fear, it will antagonise many reasonable people and lead to yet another deep polarisation that will damage us as a society.

How would Jesus react in such situations, I wonder? He too was capable of real anger, as he showed when he overturned the tables of the moneylenders in the Temple. He did indeed, as we have seen in today's Gospel, recognise that his message would divide people. What he did not do was to take strong positions on overtly political issues: he left them implicit. His answer when challenged about paying taxes to the Emperor was famously astute. Jesus' message was in many ways revolutionary, but he neither advocated violent revolution nor attempted to fulfil Jewish expectations of a Messiah who would overthrow the established political order. Where, then, does that leave us in the face of the demands of those who are protesting? It seems to me a pity that the focus has been directed so strongly to statues rather than demands for fair and equal treatment now and in future. Perhaps the issues posed by the statues are best dealt with at a local level, consulting local communities, but preferably at a pace which allows mature reflection: it has to be admitted that there is an element of opportunism and what is now called 'virtue-signalling' in some of the demands for their removal, but this leaves much scope for contextual explanation and for ensuring that our colonial history is taught in a balanced way in schools. In terms of the wider issues of justice and equality, it is always difficult to evolve sensible and reasoned policy responses in the heat of struggle. As a nation we clearly have to recognise the strength of feeling that exists and the real injustices that still prevail, and have a mature discussion, hopefully across party lines, about how these can best be addressed. The issues are complex and it doesn't help to approach them in terms of victory and division, as Donald Trump is doing in the US. Nor does it help to rush to impulsive or crowd-pleasing responses, despite angry demands for immediate action. Jesus' teachings rarely provide us with clearcut answers to social and political issues, but they do provide us with the values with which we should approach them. It is up to all of us, as his followers, to seek to apply those values in formulating our own views, and to encourage our political leaders at local and national level to approach these sensitive and challenging issues in the same way. We all need the patience, perseverance and courage that Jesus demanded of his disciples to approach these issues in a mature and sensitive manner.

Amen