

The Sermon – “Called to be radical and a peacemaker” - Revd Charles Draper
A sermon preached on 28th June 2020 (Petertide)

We always wear red for St Peter’s Day. It’s a wonderful bright vibrant colour for a special occasion. And yet of course it has a sombre meaning. We wear red in church to remember a martyr – someone who died for their faith. Legend has it that St Peter was crucified – but that as he did not feel worthy to die in the same way as Jesus, he asked to be crucified upside down.

Martyrdom is very far removed from our experience as Christians in Britain. And yet we are very much aware of many Christians being persecuted and martyred in other parts of the world today.

This year, as our churches were closed for the Easter season, we have kept our “Stations of the Cross” up in church, and our intention is not to take them down until Advent Sunday. It has felt appropriate for this time with the coronavirus, when many working in the NHS and other care workers, have given their lives caring for those with the coronavirus.

The Stations of the Cross, and the red we wear for so many saints’ days, remind us that from the very beginning Christianity was a radical faith, and many early Christians gave their lives for their faith. And we too are called to a radical allegiance to Christ. Jesus would remind us that this also means a radical commitment to his Kingdom. Jesus says: “Seek first for the kingdom of God” – and this kingdom which Jesus proclaimed to us, is all about bringing “good news to the poor, release to the captives, recovery of sight to the blind, and liberation for the oppressed”. (Luke 4 v 18)

I wonder what that means for us today? Recently I have tried to listen to the “Black lives matter” movement, and to ask what I have to learn from it. And I have found that it has challenged me about my own attitudes to racism – how much I accept it and do not challenge it, including perhaps in my own self. I have realised that although most of us would be determined never to speak or act in a racist way, it may for us be more about the things we fail to do, or the things we don’t say. I don’t know the answers, but I am sure that this is a “Kingdom of God” issue where we as Christians are called to be radical.

And then of course there is the issue of Climate Change. We may by now be feeling bored with it and wish it would go away! We can rejoice that our country has a commitment to achieve zero emissions by 2050, and yet in a year that has seen bush fires in Australia, dreadful floods in Britain, and severe cyclones in Asia, we are aware that climate change will not wait till 2050 – it is happening now and it is often the poorest people in the world who suffer from its effects the most. While the coronavirus has paused it for a moment, there will be a huge challenge as we emerge from the coronavirus, that we don’t simply go back to where we were before. Here is another “Kingdom of God” issue where I believe that we as Christians are called to be radical. So the red we use in church to remember St Peter is a reminder that this is a radical faith that we are called to follow.

But my second thought about St Peter this week is very different – almost the opposite. In our gospel today, we heard Jesus saying that St Peter would be the Rock – the Rock on which Jesus would build his church.

Curiously St Peter is not always the one with the highest profile in the early church. St Paul is of course the high profile leader of the gentile church – indeed many of the gentile churches were founded and nurtured by him. On the other hand in the Jewish church, the strongest leader appears to be St James, the brother of Jesus.

I quite feel for St Peter, finding himself between two such powerful figures! However the impression I get is that St Peter was the uniting figure, who was able to be part of both these two very different wings of the church.

That is quite a difficult role to have. St Paul on one occasion criticised him for compromising too much – behaving in a different way depending on who he was with at the time! And yet in other places St Paul himself says that when Christians disagree, we should respect each others' views, and lean over backwards to avoid causing offence to those we disagree with.

So I see St Peter as a uniting figure in the church – an example to us of the call to unity. This is certainly relevant to us as we enter a vacancy. This is a time when it will be particularly important to preserve unity in the church. There is nothing wrong of course with having disagreements – it is a sign of a lively healthy community. But it is important at such times to “disagree well”, and to preserve our mutual love and respect, to avoid offending each other, and to nurture the bonds of unity and peace in the church family.

To be radical and to be peacemakers may seem to be opposites! But they are not always. In South Africa, it was the wonderful achievement both of Nelson Mandela and Desmond Tutu that they were both able to be radicals, and yet peace makers also.

But my third thought this week about St Peter is for me the most important. We are all very familiar with the story of St Peter denying Jesus. But there are many other stories of St Peter's failures, his weaknesses and his foibles, all recorded in the gospels. It is to St Peter's immense credit that clearly he never tried to hush these stories up, but was prepared to be quite open about his vulnerability.

There is a theory that I subscribe to that St Mark's Gospel comes almost directly from St Peter. Peter is in nearly every scene – and all his weaknesses and foibles are described without mercy! Who else would have described all those embarrassing scenes? Peter could almost have described it as the story of my friend Jesus and how he helped me through all my mistakes and failures!

And what a powerful and inspiring story it is. For me, this is St Peter's greatest legacy to the church, this wonderful and vivid description of Jesus.

And how striking it is that it is St Peter's vulnerability that makes him such an effective witness. His testimony is real, honest and authentic – a true and authentic account that reveals to us the real Jesus, and through him shows us the true God. What better legacy could St Peter leave us than that?

If St Peter's greatest strength is in his vulnerability, then this too is an important example for us – that what we have to offer is not so much our strength as our vulnerability. It is through our vulnerability that the life and power of Jesus shines through. This is the good news that people need to hear, the good news that will bring people hope, the good news through which others too may find their lives transformed by the love of God.

The red colour we wear for St Peter is also the colour we wear at Pentecost – standing for the wind and flame of the Holy Spirit. My favourite stole is the red one I was given for my ordination – with both the shining light of the cross and the dove of the Holy Spirit. Jesus says in Acts 1 that the Holy Spirit will give his followers power to be his witnesses. And it is on the Day of Pentecost that St Peter preaches his first sermon – and a very powerful one too!

I believe it was the Holy Spirit that came at Pentecost that gave St Peter the courage to be a radical follower of Jesus. But I believe the Holy Spirit also gave St Peter the wisdom and the humility to be a focus for unity in the church.

And perhaps most important of all, the Holy Spirit gave St Peter both the courage and the humility to be open about his mistakes and his failures. And it was his vulnerability that made him such a powerful witness for Christ.

This I believe is what we too have to offer to the people around us – not our strengths, but our vulnerability, because it is so often through our vulnerability that the life and power of Jesus can most clearly be seen.

Amen

