

Living with faith

A sermon preached by Revd Viv Bridges on the 9th Sunday after Trinity 18 August 2019

Refs: Jeremiah 23.23-29, Hebrews 11.9-12.2, Luke 12.49-56

On first reading, no positive message leapt out from our Bible passages this week.

"They were stoned to death, they were sawn in two,^[1] they were killed by the sword" Hebrews 11:33

"I came to bring fire to the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled!" Luke 12:49

So, the only thing was to look again carefully. Jesus had been preaching about his second coming. He had warned his listeners to be ready and described some of the dramatic things that would happen before that second coming. He was angry that so many people refused to acknowledge the things that were already happening, that pointed to his being the Messiah. *'The deaf hear, the blind see, the dead raised to life'*. They were ready to accept what the weather forecasters of the day said but shut their eyes and ears to things they didn't want to know.

Of course, when something dramatic happens, it takes time for people to believe it's happening. So the Son of God's coming, his Gospel of love, wasn't producing an immediate conversion of the people. Rather it was then, as still now, causing huge divisions. In Jesus' time, for someone brought up as a Jew to turn to Christ would have been an outrage for the rest of the family. Today, people have different beliefs about religion, or politics, many issues, and if this is within a family it can divide the family. Just look at the wrangles still going on in the Church of England about, for example, homosexuality and the role of women.

This doesn't have to be the case, but for differences not to divide people requires Godly love - love that accepts that someone else could be right and respects their views, love that is humble and generous. All these qualities seem in short supply now in our nation, but they are qualities that are essential for democracy to work.

Christ knew that what he was preaching and acting out was a challenge to his society, and could divide families, so anyone who followed him and committed themselves to his values was going to have a tough time. Every now and again we hear of people calling themselves Christians who preach that if you say 'yes' to Christ, everything will be fine! You will be protected in some way from the world. So, when things go wrong - as they do - that belief is shown up as a false understanding of what it really means to follow Christ, who accepted suffering and the cross.

Our reading from Hebrews seems to give a mixed message. The first part uses examples from the Old Testament to reflect the belief that faith in God will protect us from the world and help us achieve anything. God made a covenant with his people and it seems that in those first Old Testament times, if they were faithful, God really did look after them. We heard about the Israelites - Rahab, Gideon and so on - whose faith protected them and gave them strength to conquer everything. But then this seemed to stop working all the time. The second part of our passage reminds us of those people who were faithful, but still were tortured, cut in two, stoned to death, or had to wander around in the desert. So, the writer proclaims *'they did not receive what was promised'*, an understatement, perhaps. But, of course, this was only in this world.

The writer reminds us that God had promised them something else, something in a life to come that is infinitely better than anything that can come in this world. So, the writer goes on to encourage us to get on with things. Whatever life throws at us, we must remember those who have gone before us who continued to witness to their love of God despite the terrible things this might have brought about. We mustn't be afraid of the consequences of witnessing to our own love of God in Jesus Christ. We must focus on Jesus, put our trust in him to strengthen and guide us, reminding ourselves that we are surrounded by the spirits, if you like, of many witnesses to him who have gone before.

Jeremiah warned those who called themselves prophets to speak the truth, not what they think people wanted to hear. So, we must spread God's Gospel of love in truth, even though this may well bring hardship.

If we are open about our faith in Jesus Christ in this country, we probably won't be sawn in two or stoned to death. Such persecution does happen in other countries. But even here we may be ridiculed, laughed at, excluded for our faith. It may cause division in our families, separate us from people we love. Following Christ will bring other difficulties. Last week Sarah [Flashman] reminded us that our human longings and desires may not be what God wills for us, so we often have to wrestle with the personal conflict this brings.

So being faithful to Christ and proclaiming his love may bring its own difficulties and it won't protect us from the problems of everyday life. It doesn't cut us off from ill health, or the pain and sorrow of loss, or from the practical difficulties of living in the world. But what faith in Jesus Christ does do is give us the strength to get through those hardships. It gives us '*the promise of something better*', something amazing, wonderful, in a life to come, something to hang on to in our darkest moments.

It gives us the example of Jesus Christ - when we suffer, we know that Jesus suffers with us because he walked his own road of suffering. We know he is always with us. Sometimes we realize his presence and love through those people who support and comfort us, and we know that we are surrounded by that 'cloud/crowd of witnesses' to pray for us and support us.

I realize that this is easy to say, but I know that many people have had very real experiences of the support and comfort that comes through their faith. I'm sure many of you have experienced times that taking our conflicts, doubts and fears to God in prayer opens us to the Holy Spirit, and we find strength, a way of going on through difficult times and a deepening of our trust and faith in his love. I'm sure we have met many people for whom this is true, and who keep going through what seem the most dreadful of situations, and who do so with grace, and often a sense of peace and joy that is awe-inspiring.

Opening our hearts and minds to the Holy Spirit can also enable God to give us those gifts of humility and generosity we need to live in peace and love with people who believe different things from ourselves.

Well - how amazing! or perhaps not so. God works in mysterious ways. Initially I couldn't see much that was positive from our readings. They were grim, and in one way this is right, life in Christ is likely to be tough in many ways. We shan't always have an easy life. But we shall always be supported and strengthened to get through the tough times. God will always be with us, through our unity with Jesus Christ, through that '*cloud of witnesses*' and through the Holy Spirit.

Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the sake of the joy that was set before him endured the cross, disregarding its shame, and has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God.

Amen