mon 11.07.21

Two doses of vaccination may prove hugely useful in lowering vulnerability to serious Covid illness, but, we’re learning that we shall have to get used to Covid being around for many years to come.

Two doses of the spirit in Baptism and Confirmation may prove useful to our religious health, but are no guarantee that it will stick. Indeed there was, I noticed recently, an argument advanced in the letters section of the Church Times, suggesting that we should confirm all bats who inhabit parish churches up and down the land, as confirmation seems the only guarantee that they would stop coming to church.

But today’s readings remind us that the cost of discipleship is high. And if it isn’t, then perhaps we need to examine our discipleship.

Poor old Amos felt hugely under-resourced for the task. ‘I am no prophet or a prophet’s son, but a herdsman and a dresser of sycamore trees’, he pleads. But, God’s call was insistent- get on with speaking truth to power, Amos.

It’s replicated in the story of John the Baptist, the only lengthy passage in the Gspels which doesn’t directly, at least, involve Jesus. But a note of caution- don’t get your Herods mixed up. This Herod-Antipas, is not the same ruler as the Beast of Bethlehem slaughtering all the new born infants, nor is he Herod the Great who, as we’ll hear on St James Day later this month, murdered James the leader of the church in Jerusalem. No this Herod Antipas- with a very ambitious wife, and a very low moral threshold himself- a dangerous combination- this Herod, was eventually banished to Northern France for usurping the power of the Roman Emperor.

This story in all its detail, speaks of both power and powerlessness. Herod seemed, on one level, to have all the power, and used it with his wonten lack of ethical scruples. John seemed to have no power- held captive, executed, buried we know not where. And yet, John stands as this hugely powerful figure, the last of the great prophets whose life and words directly link him to his kinsman Jesus. And who among us, knew, in all honesty, what became of Herod Antipas and the Mrs?

For power does not equate to force. John’s power relates to the incarnated divine life- manifested in actions of integrity and words of truth. The Cost of Discipleship was high for John the Baptist- and for hundreds of thousands of others who gave up, give up so much for the sake of the Good News and living in its power, so often seen by those who have force, as weakness. But that is mistaken. The story of the Christian Martyrs, whether of ancient or contemporary worlds is truly remarkable.

Now not all situations are going to require the same model of confronting abusive power in such a precarious and dangerous way. But all Christian life does require the same fidelity to God that we see supremely in Christ, but also in John the Baptist and the Christian martyrs down the ages.

Fascinatingly this story of John the Baptist’s arrest, imprisonment and murder- to appease a tricky and morally unjustifiable boast, is set in part of Mark’s Gospel story where everything else is going swimmingly. Its full of the accounts of the disciples on mission- their successes in preaching, healing, reconciling, encouraging- and yet amidst all this positivity, comes this dark episode. Not only does this clever juxtaposition remind us that living God’s way involves suffering, shame, pain as well as potential victories. It also teaches us that the disciples just hadn’t twigged- yet again. They hadn’t done the math.- they were in the first flush of excited ministry, discovering the power of love and revolutionary compassion, without calculating the cost. So too, We should not be surprised when the apathy to the truth by which we seek to live, occasionally turns into hatred, bitterness, revenge. Be it among the populist press, the hard-sell merchants or the idealogues of our contemporary society. Not wanting the church to raise its voice in protest at the collapse of decent refugee care in our country, not wanting the church to stand up for those incarcerated in our prisons who should be in hospital care for mental health or addictive illness, not wanting the church to speak out about food insecurity and child poverty in our land- to name but a few realities, is evidence that the cost of discipleship is high even here when we wish to speak and live with God’s reconciling love. Let us not make the same mistake as the disciples. And friends in high places is no security when it comes to living the demands of our one true friend in the highest place which heaven affords. Remember Herod Antipas was intrigued by John liked to go and discuss with him in prison. Just like Pilate too was intrigued by this Jesus, indeed, confirmed his innocence, yet handwashing is but one small step away from the executioner’s axe.

When the sculptures of the martyrs of the 20thC Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Abp Janani Luwum of Uganda, Maximilian Kolbe, Martin Luther King, Oscar Romero and the others- were unveiled over Westminster Abbey’s West Door- there was surprise and consternation, but they serve as a powerful reminder, that all who enter here do so at their own risk.

John the Baptist’s power, as this story so clearly indicates, is located in that he fulfilled his role by being true, by speaking for God’s truth and justice, by standing aside and making room for this Jesus to take centre stage- right up to his tragic end. Which of course wasn’t his end, as our reflection upon him today indicates. But in its light, we can hardly feign surprise, as followers of the crucified and risen Lord, that we too need to live knowing the cost, as well as the joy of discipleship.

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