Sermon 22.08.21 Proper 16 CC

Who could ever have predicted the amazing speed at which the Taliban have re-taken control over the whole of Afghanistan? It seems that in most areas fighting was relatively light and large numbers of the army and police just gave up the cause of defending the government’s rule, not least of course when they heard of government ministers and officials fleeing the country. Oh that Biden and Johnson had read William Dalrymple’s excellent books on the British-Afghan Wars in the 19thC- then we might have known that the western sense of nation state and the centralised rule of law for all, will not prevail here.

But how strange too that this very week, the Gospel reading should be one in which we read that ‘many of Jesus’ disciples turned back and no longer went about with him’. The Church of England’s current ludicrous obsession with number driven mission, flies in the face of this Gospel reading that some found the message of Jesus just too hard to cope with and turned their backs on this man who had intrigued and challenged them. There is no suggestion at all in the Gospel, that I can find, that the church will endlessly grow, move constantly upwards in terms of numbers and be in infinitely flourishing mode.

Jesus asks his friends, who are struggling with what he does and says, struggling how to come to terms with his lifestyle, his assumptions, his language, his actions, he asks even his closest friends, ‘Do you also wish to go away?’. And yet some of us are still here- yes, still struggling to think and distil, what the message of Jesus might be in any particular situation or set of circumstances. As the disciples said his ‘teaching is difficult, who can accept it?’ Even more provocatively, Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote ‘When Christ calls someone to follow him, he calls him to die’.

For the hearers of Jesus in his day and context, the particular offensiveness of his words here related to eating his body and drinking his blood. Two thousand years of the church’s liturgical practice has blunted the shock of this revolutionary self-interpretation. We’ve got used to it, become comfortable with this imagery and language.

But I hardly think that we, or those who aren’t in church today, have got used to Peter’s assertion that Jesus ‘has the words of eternal life’. What does this even mean for us? How does it impact our living, our attitudes, our decision making, day by day. It is presumably the very reason why Joshua, the successor to Moses, who led the Hebrew people over the Jordan into settlement in the Promised Land, it’s why he felt the need to call the people together for a solemn assembly. Perhaps rather like a Renewal of Baptismal vows, or ordination vows, both of which we do each year. A calling to remind us, again and again, of the promises we make in setting the self-giving love we see in Jesus, as the touchstone, the benchmark, the plumbline for our own lives too. Calling and recalling us back to this teaching that ‘is so difficult, who can accept it?’

And where is the difficulty for us? As I say, probably, no longer in the language of Christ’s body and blood. But perhaps it is above all in this notion that Jesus calls us to step outside the world’s values and judgements and to live by a different model of engagement with God’s world- a model which ultimately sees self-sacrificing love as the highest measure of human achievement- not income or status or intellectual prowess. And that is hard- because the ‘normality’ we experience in our everyday worlds seems to fly in the face of this- with cosmetics telling us we we’re worth it, with consumerism telling us we need things instantly and advertising fuelling our fear of being left behind.

Yes, the message of Jesus is hard. Maybe we could gain an inkling of how to live in this tension by reflecting on the exhortation we find in today’s epistle, to take things a step at a time, or at least, one article of clothing at a time. Clothing ourselves- like Christ- in truth, in doing what we know to be right, in not being afraid to speak about the good news of God’s love, in deepening our faith, in aiming for wholeness and consistency in being- that, after all is what salvation means. Then we might be able to stand, as Paul says- or at least, not fall quite so often.

Maybe- but yes, it is difficult to be a follower of Jesus Christ. Get used to it. Live with it. Don’t assume it is ever going to be anything other than difficult. Live in the tension, not running away and not relying upon easy answers, because there are none. Living in the mess and the pain and all the contradictions of our age- that is where we are to be, because that is where God is.

So, my joke for this 4th August Sunday:

Why has the Covid 19 Pandemic been so impossibly difficult for the Flat Earth Society? Because they fear social distancing rules may push people over the edge.

For Christ promises us life, not escape.

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