

A Sermon by the Reverend Timothy A R Cole
The Fourth Sunday after Pentecost
Sunday, June 28, 2020

Jeremiah 28: 5-9
Psalm 89
Romans 6: 12-23
Matthew 10: 40-42

“All service ranks the same with God:
If now, as formerly He trod
Paradise, His presence fills
Our earth, each only as God wills
Can work—God's puppets, best and worst,
Are we: there is no last nor first.”

Robert Browning

It is interesting how differently one is received depending on who people think we are. My own Dad, as most of you know, was also an Episcopalian priest, and he was, for many years, Rector of a Church called St Cuthbert's in Edinburgh. In the same city there was a very large and well-known Cooperative, also called St Cuthbert's.

So it was that Dad was at a drinks party one evening and someone asked him what he did. “I'm the Rector of St Cuthbert's”, he said. The conversation then went on and, much to my father's surprise, his conversation partner seemed to think he was an expert on business. He was asked questions on margins, staffing and advertising. The chap had, of course, misheard. Instead of Rector he had heard Director! Dad being Dad, of course, never batted an eyelid and proceeded to answer every question as if he was indeed the Director of a large Corporation and Business. Which just goes to show, if you answer people's questions confidently and articulately, they will normally just accept what you say!! He got me with that many times.

In Jesus's time, the Jews of his day, thought that any messenger, ambassador, or emissary should always be received literally as if they were the person they were representing. Just like Dad was received, for a few minutes at least, as if he really were the Director of a large business called St Cuthbert's, so the custom was to pay respect and give hospitality as if the person represented were actually with you. So it

is that his hearers would have understood that when Jesus said “He who receives you, receives me; and he who receives me, receives him that sent me” that he was telling them that they were both ambassador for Christ and the host that receives God when they receive him.

We are both hosts and ambassadors for Christ.

In these last months, devastated by pandemic and the rising tide of anger and hurt as deep and troubling issues of race come to the fore, I think we are all struggling to understand anew what it means to host and receive Christ and also to represent him and his Kingdom as his Ambassadors.

I think this morning’s Gospel does give us both hope and a challenge.

The hope is simple. Jesus is clearly saying that not everyone can be a prophet or a saint, but we can all receive them. Almost no great personage, prophet, or saint has ever done what they did on their own.

I remember a wonderful man called George who helped at the Church I was Rector of in Edinburgh some years ago. George was in his early, seventies, I guess. He was retired with a small pension and lived very simply. On top of that he worked on a purely voluntary basis, well over 40 hrs a week in the Church, serving at the altar, cleaning, laying out vestments and a hundred other tasks. George would never have wanted to stand up and speak in Church. He was a very quiet, godly and humble man. And yet I, and everyone else at that Church owed him a great debt of gratitude for his faithfulness and service. Part of what Jesus is saying in this passage is that you don’t have to be the great man or woman in the public eye. You don’t have to be the famous prophet or the Saint or a priest. Yet in as much as you receive and help these people in Christ’s service, you will receive just as big a reward in heaven as they do. Why? Because, as Robert Browning says in the poem, “All service ranks the same with God”. God is not interested in how intelligent we are, how eloquent we are at public speaking, not even how incredibly gifted we may be in some ways. He is not interested, because he knows he gave us those gifts. We didn’t earn them. All that is required of any of us is to serve God. We have to serve in the ways we best suited to us, but I am certain the reward is just same for people like George, as it is for all the great prophetic preachers, saints, Bishops and any clergy, assuming, which is a big assumption of course, that those preachers, saints, Bishops or clergy are faithful in their service. I suspect George was often more faithful in his, than most of us were in ours some of the time.

So, don't ever think because you are not dancing in the spotlight of the world and wowing the masses, that the value of your service is any less than those that do in God's eyes.

Another way of saying this, which we sadly forget all the time, is that there is, in fact, only one thing that any Christian needs to do, and that is God's will in that moment. If that means making someone a cup of tea or washing their clothes or just waiting patiently for what you need to do to become clear to you, that doesn't matter as long as that is what God actually desires from you.

"All service ranks the same with God".

The second thing that this morning's Gospel brings me at least, is that challenge. How on earth am I to be his ambassador and represent his Kingdom in this broken and emotionally wild and stormy time where forces for good and evil are whirling around and through each other, and where many find our words impossible to hear. Well, we are all trying to work that one out, aren't we? I wish I had a more complete answer for you, but I don't.

But, perhaps this Gospel, does give us more help than we might think on first reading. There are times when we should be prophets. Times when we should lead the cry for the truth and the right. Times always, when we should be ready to give the cool clear water of kindness to our fellow disciples on the way. Yet, maybe this is not a time, for most of us at least, to be these things. Like sitting by a family who have just lost a child, as I remember doing more than once. Perhaps the best thing we can do is to say nothing. To refrain from words that might make sense one day, but would only be to add more pain just now.

Perhaps we need, above all things, to listen, even when we disagree with what is being said and done, even when the words we hear imply that we are less good than we thought we were, even when what we hear describes things that we did not believe were there at all, and certainly that should not be there. Not now. Not in our day after so much has already been suffered, achieved and done. And yet we see them revealed all too clearly.

So maybe that is the Ambassador's role for a time. To listen, to acknowledge the pain, and to accept the fact that we sometimes have only our attention, a listening ear and an open heart to offer.

A very wise man I know, said this. "This is not only about law and legislation, though it is about that. Fundamentally, this is an affair of the heart."

That's the challenge. To keep our hearts' open to Christ and his transforming power, to seek, in this storm of good and evil, to receive the former with humility and to oppose the latter with courage. This week saw the first services in our buildings since March. Morning Prayer is now being said on Tuesdays and Thursdays at 7.30 a.m. It was so good to be there and to pray with other people again. For me, it was a sign that, however long the storms of sickness and anger rage, God is still there in the midst of it with us and, as he promises at every Baptism, he will see us through.