

16th Sunday after Trinity

Collect: Lord, we beseech you mercifully to hear the prayers of your people who call upon you; and grant that they may both perceive and know what things they ought to do, and also may have grace and power faithfully to fulfil them; through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord, who is alive and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever.

Psalm 25.3–5: Make me to know your ways, O Lord, and teach me your paths.

Lead me in your truth and teach me, for you are the God of my salvation; for you have I hoped all the day long. Remember, Lord, your compassion and love, for they are from everlasting.

Philippians 2.1–13: If then there is any encouragement in Christ, any consolation from love, any sharing in the Spirit, any compassion and sympathy, make my joy complete: be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others. Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross. Therefore God also highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend in heaven and on earth and under the earth and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord to the glory of God the Father.

Matthew 21.23–32: When Jesus entered the temple, the chief priests and the elders of the people came to him as he was teaching, and said, ‘By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority?’ Jesus said to them, ‘I will also ask you one question; if you tell me the answer, then I will also tell you by what authority I do these things. Did the baptism of John come from heaven, or was it of human origin?’ And they argued with one another, ‘If we say, “From heaven”, he will say to us, “Why then did you not believe him?” But if we say, “Of human origin”, we are afraid of the crowd; for all regard John as a prophet.’ So they answered Jesus, ‘We do not know.’ And he said to them, ‘Neither will I tell you by what authority I am doing these things. ‘What do you think? A man had two sons; he went to the first and said, “Son, go and work in the vineyard today.” He answered, “I will not”; but later he changed his mind and went. The father went to the second and said the same; and he answered, “I go, sir”; but he did not go. Which of the two did the will of his father?’ They said, ‘The first.’ Jesus said to them, ‘Truly I tell you, the tax-collectors and the prostitutes are going into the kingdom of God ahead of you. For John came to you in the way of righteousness and you did not believe him but the tax-collectors and the prostitutes believed him and even after you saw it you did not change your minds and believe him.

Reflection:

We have been and we should continue to celebrate the response to the pandemic of the vast majority of people everywhere. The frontline services, the words and actions coming from kindness and how most of us facing the challenges of this time are doing so as best we can. The novels of Charles Dickens include similar celebrations of the human spirit. There are references to how communities responded to viruses, but it was his explicit consideration of the sacrifices a person might make for another that came to mind as I thought about our bible readings. The novel “A Tale of Two Cities is set around 1789; the time of the French Revolution and the Reign of Terror. Its opening and closing lines some of the most famous in literature.

These are the opening lines. "It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair, we had everything before us, we had nothing before us, we were all going direct to Heaven, we were all going direct the other way—in short, the period was so far like the present period, that some of its noisiest authorities insisted on its being received, for good or for evil, in the superlative degree of comparison only." And the closing lines, the words of Sydney Carton as he comes to the place of execution in the place of Charles Darney: "It is a far, far better thing that I do, than I have ever done; it is a far, far better rest that I go to than I have ever known."

What or for who would we be prepared to exchange our life; to die instead of? This choice was made by the catholic priest Maximilian Kolbe who chose to take the place of and be killed instead of a man he did not know in a concentration camp. We remember at this time the bravery of the Battle of Britain fighter pilots in 1940. And to reflect also on the words of the families of those killed in the Manchester Arena. The mother of one teenager killed in the arena bomb speaking of "unbearable pain" and told a public inquiry she wished "it was me not her" who died.

What gave Jesus his authority? I think we can say that it was his willingness to die for others. The religious leaders of his day were mainly characterised by their fear of being unpopular and upsetting the crowd. And so we find Jesus encouraged them to be more honest, more true suggesting that we might look outside many of the formal trappings of religious practice where that faith has become exclusive and self-serving in character.

And in today's bible readings we can also reflect on who the tax collectors and prostitutes in the bible passage might represent? It says they are those who followed John the Baptist and had come to recognise their worth as human beings. That even though life had left them in a hard place, ostracised by society, they were loved by God, loved as a person and that the labels of sin and shame placed on them were because others, especially the religious leaders placed them on them, failing to recognise, love and value them as fellow human beings.

Today we might include people who are employed in unpopular jobs just as tax collecting was in the time of Jesus, those open to perceptions of bribery, those in public services being abused who are simply trying to do their job as best they can. And also we think about all the people society does not seem to know what to do with, those who are trafficked migrants on boats in the channel or in camps in southern Europe.

In reflecting on their situation as we remember that Jesus died regarded as a nobody, a nothing. He was passed around during his trial; by the scribes and pharisees, to Pilate, to Herod, back to Pilate, someone no one wanted to deal with but who will end up being killed. Jesus dying a shameful, criminal's death even as his deep humanity is most seen. When there is crisis, when there is disorder, a victim very often needs to be found. The death of Sydney Carton in the Dicken's novel does offer a particular insight into how the victim of a lynching or a kangaroo court might still have something important to say and when it comes to Jesus as part of his church we build our faith around what he said and did particularly as he approached his death.

Being able to affirm that "Jesus is Lord" has integrity as we also recognise the value of human sacrifice that enables reconciliation, that brings justice to those whose lives have been broken by the very worst of situations and worst of human actions and connects us with a real sense of the spirit of God that sweeps over the waters bringing light and life to all creation out of the chaos and darkness. John Bell recently wrote this prayer: "The light of Christ be ours today. The light of Christ shine on our way. And for more light for us we pray: To lead us on, to see us through."