

SERMON for Pentecost 20 - October 10th, 2021.

Readings: Amos 5: 6-7, 10-15; Psalm 90: 12-17; Hebrews 4: 12-16; Mark 10: 17-31.

You may be aware that Revd Sue Lodge-Calvert writes a weekly blog, reflecting on the coming week's readings. Quite often, while I may go in a different direction to her, I find her opening comments will spark something off for me.

This week was no different. She began:

If we do not feel as though a two-edged sword has penetrated us to the marrow then maybe we have not heard the gospel!¹

Whether or not a two-edge sword has pierced us, we certainly have some quite challenging readings this morning. They seem to be full of warnings to be true to who we really are, and not to hide behind the mask which we show to the world.

In our Collect this morning we prayed:

“...draw us away from the easy road that leads to destruction,
and guide us into paths that lead to life abundant,
that in seeking your truth, and obeying your will,
we may know the joy of being a disciple of Jesus our Saviour;” [APBA]

The prophet Amos encourages us to:

Seek good and not evil. that you may live

Hate evil and love good, and establish justice in the gate ... [Amos 5: 14a, 15a]

The writer of Hebrews warns us:

the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword ... it is able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart. [Hebrews 4:12]

Then, in our gospel today, Mark tells a story of Jesus' encounter with a young man who has encountered a major stumbling block in his life.

Sue continues:

There is no escaping the challenge to our attachment to our possessions, our status, our roles and relationships, our ideas and preferences, our desires. ¹

In his version of the story, Mark typically doesn't give us many details about this encounter. From Matthew & Luke's versions of what is probably the same story, we learn that this man is rich, young and a ruler. While he seemed to have everything, he was dissatisfied with his life, it was empty, without purpose. He kept the Law, he lived what was considered a good, pious life, but still there was something missing.

He had no doubt heard about Jesus, well, who hadn't! And so, he approaches Jesus in the hope that he may have the answers to his inner restlessness. Jesus challenges the man about the life he lives - does he keep the commandments which Moses laid down - not only their literal interpretation but Jesus takes them a step further - has he defrauded anyone? The man responds that he has kept the Law since his youth. Jesus loved him but knew that there was something that was holding him back from fully following him - his possessions. “Go, sell what you own, give the money to the poor, and then follow me.” Unfortunately, this was a step too far for this rich young man. ²

Last weekend I celebrated the Feast of St Francis, by blessing our furry friends at the morning service, in Denmark.

Francis' story could have been similar to the young man who encountered Jesus. 800 years ago, in the small Italian city of Assisi there was another rich young man. He was

handsome, popular, the life and soul of every party, the instigator of at least half the mischief that went on around the place! Francesco di Bernardone was rich, young and a leader amongst his peer group, son of a wealthy cloth merchant, he was one of the *nouveau riche*, the new wealthy upper class, made up mainly of merchants.

Francis had a great love of life, but his attitude to life took a dramatic turn after he spent a year or so in prison waiting to be ransomed, following capture during a war with the neighbouring city of Perugia. Whilst in prison, Francis is believed to have contracted malaria and after his release, his former lifestyle no longer held any attraction for him. He became dissatisfied with his life, it was empty, without purpose.

This rich young man took to wandering the countryside, sleeping in caves, and calling in at some of the small wayside churches which dotted the Umbrian countryside.

One day, on his wanderings, he came across the small church of San Damiano, on the hillside, outside the city walls, below Assisi. The church was partly in ruins, a sign of great neglect over a long period of time. He went inside and knelt before a huge crucifix and prayed. We don't know what his prayer was, whether he poured his heart and soul out to God, or whether he knelt there in silent meditation, what we do know is that this rich young man heard a voice speak to him from the crucifix:

“Francis, do you not see that my house is being destroyed? Go, therefore, and repair it.”

Unlike the man from the gospel, Francis responded positively to the directive. Positively and literally! He looked around him and saw that the church was in need of repair, so he set about repairing it. In time Francis' simple lifestyle attracted many of his former friends. His life devoted to God - worshipping God, preaching the gospel, helping those who had less than the nothing which he possessed. This “rich young man” responded totally to Jesus' challenge to “go, sell everything, give it to the poor and follow me.” As with his original response, it was literal. He refused to own anything, and often he would give the one tunic he had if he saw someone in more need than himself.

While on the surface, the rich young man of the gospel, was leading a good life, Jesus knew that something was holding him back. He identified it as the young man's great wealth, which he couldn't let go of.

As I said earlier, the writer of Hebrews reminds us that God knows us through and through, knows our true heart, our true self and knows that isn't what we always show the world.

We heard what held the young man back from following Jesus more closely. What holds me back? What holds you back?

I have been aware for some time that my ideal is a world of love, of respect and of compassion. If you like, that is my 'gospel', my good news. It is what I see in Jesus in his encounter with the young man.

Jesus loved him, he had respect for him and was filled with compassion when the man just couldn't commit that last bit.

What holds me back from following the way my idealistic self wants to go?

What holds you back from following Christ more nearly?

In John's gospel, Jesus is recorded as saying:

“³⁴I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. ³⁵**By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.**” [John13:34-35]

So it can be argued that it is the way we treat one another, which is the greatest witness to our faith. Our behaviour springs out of our deep beliefs, it could be described as the fruit of our life, like the fruit of the Spirit which St Paul talks about in that great letter to the church in Corinth. It is all tied up with Jesus' call to follow him.

For the rich young man who ran to Jesus so full of hope, the asking price was too much. For St Francis, another rich young man, no price was too high.

But what price for us? Jesus calls us to follow him, to rebuild / repair his church. While we have care and stewardship over the bricks and mortar, it is people who are more important - "everyone will know you are my disciples, if you have love for one another."

In the alternate Collect today, we pray:

God of the narrow way,
you call us to shed all that burdens the lightness of life:
help us to surrender false wealth,
embrace our need of you
and live for your kingdom above all things;
through Jesus Christ, the richness of God. Amen.³

The Lord be with you.

Revd Sally Buckley
13 October 2024

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS:

1. Revd Sue Lodge-Calvert, in her reflection; *Attachment and Detachment*, posted on October 9, 2024 on her blog www.companionsontheway.com
2. *Sunday Journal* # 78 page 66
3. *Prayers for an Inclusive Church*, Stephen Shakespeare © 2008.