

Sermon for Evensong on the Fourth Sunday of Lent, 31st March 2019

Isaiah 40:27-41:13, 2 Timothy 4:1-8 - Pressing on Regardless?

This is the fourth Sunday of Lent. This morning we celebrated it as Mothering Sunday; this fourth Sunday in Lent is also known as Rose Sunday or Refreshment Sunday. Sundays themselves don't count as days in Lent but the idea is that Refreshment Sunday is a time when any Lent abstinences are relaxed. So if there is a stampede for the pub at the end of this service you will be able to justify it on the basis that it is Rose Sunday.

We are just over half way through the 40 days of Lent. Yesterday was day 25 and our Lent study groups on Wednesday and Thursday have been looking at the sayings of Jesus called the Beatitudes, the 'blessed are they' sayings that Jesus started his great Sermon on the Mount with.

Blessed are the poor in spirit; blessed are those who mourn; blessed are the meek; blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness; blessed are the merciful, the pure in heart, the peacemakers, those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake.

In this last week, the emphasis has been on mercy, which includes forgiveness. Forgiveness is mercy after the hurt has been done; not reacting to an offence or a hurt. In God's kingdom these are principles to be upheld; this is part of how to follow what is right and the good.

In our lessons today there's an obvious connection with this; The first lesson is from the prophet Isaiah, from what is known as 'Second Isaiah', the second part of the book of Isaiah. There were three writers called collectively 'Isaiah', the first one writing around 760BC and the second one, the one that we have read from

today, at the time of the exile in Babylon, 587BC, nearly 200 years later. These 40th and 41st chapters of the prophecy of Isaiah are intended to reassure the Israelites in exile that the Lord will come to their rescue and will save them. They will ‘mount up on eagles’ wings’ and come out of captivity. The message to the descendants of Abraham was *‘Fear thou not; for I am with thee: be not dismayed; for I am thy God: I will strengthen thee; yea, I will help thee’*.

So it is a great message of reassurance to the chosen people of God: rather like the Beatitudes in the sense that, in a lot of the Beatitudes, the idea is that you may be suffering in one way or another: for instance, ‘Blessed are the poor in spirit’, which is translated in some Bibles as ‘blessed are those who know that they are poor,’ but things will get better: you will inherit the Kingdom of Heaven. Blessed are the sorrowful: blessed are the sad; because they shall be consoled, they shall be happy again.

Jesus sets up an antithesis between the kingdom of heaven and present woes, everything that’s wrong with normal human life - maybe thinking of Adam and Eve and the Fall, or the sinfulness of man, the imperfection of man, the imperfectibility of man: remember that a Greek word which is often used to connote ‘sin’, *ἁμαρτία*, means literally ‘missing the mark’, just not attaining the perfect standard.

Jesus is saying in the Beatitudes that nevertheless, in the Kingdom of Heaven, things will turn out all right.

But then there is our second reading, from the Second Letter to Timothy, which is described in the Bible as ‘the Second Epistle of Paul the Apostle’, although it may not actually be by St Paul. It is one of what are called the ‘Pastoral Epistles’ in the Bible, ‘pastoral’ not because they are about sheep-farming, but because they are addressed to ‘pastors’, to ministers. The first and second

letters to Timothy and the letter to Titus fall into this category. They provide teaching about how a Christian minister is supposed to behave.

‘Preach the word; be instant in season, out of season; reprove, rebuke, exhort with all long suffering and doctrine. For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine; but after their own lusts shall they heap to themselves teachers, having itching ears...’ [vv.2-3]

Press it home: to be ‘instant’ in Latin means to be pressing, to be insistent. Press on ‘...in season, out of season.’ When it is convenient, or even when it’s inconvenient.

‘... reprove, rebuke, exhort’. [U]se argument, reproof, and appeal, with all the patience that the work of teaching requires. For the time will come when they will not stand wholesome teaching, but will follow their own fancy and gather a crowd of teachers to tickle their ears.’ [NEB] Or, ‘having itching ears’ in King James’ Version.

So in a way, if the first bit of our Bible lessons tonight is addressed to all of us, that God is encouraging his chosen people, that he has the power to help them, that he has the power to help us: if that message is for everyone, you could say that the message from the second lesson, from the 2nd Letter to Timothy, is addressed not to you but to me, as one of your ministers. It puts a heavy responsibility on me, to give you wholesome teaching and to stick to it ‘in season or out of season’, whether you like it or not.

Well, I spent three years being trained as a minister, and of course I am tasked with being in a constant state of learning: being open to doctrine and proper teaching at all times, and trying to keep up

to date with as much theology as I can. But sometimes there are challenges, and sometimes I'm sure I get things wrong, despite trying to stick to the straight and narrow path.

Let me run a current example past you. I'm risking breaking my own rules; you know, the sub-heading for all my sermons is that they are delivered 'six feet above contradiction'! But in this case, I would be really interested to learn what you all think - although I hope your reaction will not be like the man in the congregation in Hartford, Connecticut, when I preached there, who said he'd enjoyed my sermon, but had disagreed with it - so much so, that if he'd been a younger man, he said, he would have had to shoot me! Bear in mind that Hartford is the home of the Colt Manufacturing Company, the makers of the Colt 45 pistol so beloved by cowboys and gangsters.

What do you think that a minister should teach about and preach? Here is a current example. On your way out you can pick up the Annual Report of our church. In there you will find a report which I wrote about the Cobham Area Foodbank, which I help to manage. I report that, since the introduction of Universal Credit last year, the amount of food which we give out to local people in need has gone up from half a metric ton to three-quarters of a tonne each week. The question for me as a minister, is, should I discuss or comment on why this has happened?

The original draft of my report said it was because of the 'cruel' Universal Credit system introduced by the government, and because the minimum wage is 'inadequate'. But we decided not to put these points in, as they might be regarded as political comment rather than strictly factual. Is that the right thing to do?

For discussion I would argue that the inadequacy of the minimum wage and the cruelty of Universal Credit are actually questions of

fact rather than opinions. It can be shown that anyone on the minimum wage round here does not earn enough to live on. See the Living Wage Foundation's figures - they are a respected independent research body founded in 2001 - that recommend a minimum of £10.55 per hour in the London area, compared with the current 'national living wage' set by the government of £7.83 per hour for over-25s. Around 40% of our Foodbank clients give 'low income' as the reason for needing to come to us. They just don't earn enough.

Is Universal Credit really 'cruel'? The Trussell Trust, whose network our Foodbank subscribes to, has stated that the way that Universal Credit is administered by the government, which imposes a five-week wait for obtaining benefits, is not right. See <https://tinyurl.com/y3h8l6bf> . Trussell are currently running a campaign under the slogan 'Five Weeks too Long'. I would say, if you had to wait five weeks to get any money with which to buy food, that that was cruel, and that it's not 'political' to say so.

I think that a Christian preacher should be 'political'. Our archbishops produced the famous 'Faith in the City' report in 1985, criticising Thatcherism, and Archbishop William Temple's report called 'Christianity and the Social Order', published in 1942, was influential in leading towards the creation of the welfare state in 1946. Both were attacked as being 'political' rather than theological. Archbishop Justin, in his recent attack on payday lending, on Wonga, was also criticised in the same way. What do you think?

I would suggest that Jesus' great commandment to love our neighbours as ourselves implies that we should care about social justice; I'm sure you won't need me to remind you of the picture of the life of the early Christians in Acts chapter 2. 'They met constantly to hear the apostles teach and to share the common life,

to break bread and to pray. ... All whose faith had drawn them together held everything in common: they would sell their property and possessions and make a general distribution as the need of each required.'

Or the story of the Rich Young Ruler which appears in three of the Gospels, Matthew, Mark and Luke; Matthew 19:21 - *'If you wish to go the whole way, go, sell your possessions, and give to the poor, and then you will have riches in heaven; and come, follow me.'* [22] *When the young man heard this, he went away with a heavy heart; for he was a man of great wealth.'*

Or look at the words of the Magnificat. *'He hath filled the hungry with good things: and the rich he hath sent away empty'* [Luke 1:51-52]

This is a tough gospel for those of us who enjoy our rich lives here in one of the richest parts of one of the richest countries in the world. But is that any reason for not pointing these things out? I'm suggesting that if we just ignore things that are unjust in this way, they won't just go away.

Well, anyway, please keep your Colt 45s in your pockets, and tell me what you think. Meanwhile I feel I must continue to be 'instant', as the Letter told Timothy to be.

Amen.

Hugh Bryant