

## Farewell Sermon

### Introduction

- I'd like to thank you all for the opportunity and privilege it has been to serve as Pastor of Trinity.
- Debbie & I have particularly appreciated the care and love you have shown us over the last three years, and now through the current crisis.
- Above all, thanks and glory should be given to God for the good that has been done and the progress that has been achieved.

Today is a special day for me as this is my final sermon before I retire after 25 years at Trinity, and 40 years of stipendiary ministry. *I need a new challenge and that challenge is what is known as 'retirement'*. Mind you, it's not quite as I or you envisaged.

- I didn't mind too much having to wait an extra 9 months before being able to claim my state pension.
- But it was frustrating to have to wait an extra additional day because this year is a leap year!
- And my enforced 'shielding', for an as yet unknown period, is perhaps not quite what Debbie had in mind as the best way to start enjoying retirement with me.

I will have self-isolated for almost six weeks by the time this sermon is posted on YouTube, and I have hardly left the manse site since then. These are indeed peculiar and, for some, very anxious times.

I have been using this time to think about the Apostle Paul in prison and under house-arrest. His freedom of movement was very much restricted. People could always visit him and he had opportunity to write, debate, preach and enjoy Christian fellowship. We know he did miss his 'books and parchments' but, as you can probably see, I have more than enough reading material at hand! However, in the midst of his restrictions, Paul never gave up hope – and neither should we!

I have also become much more aware of our Christian brothers and sisters who have no fellowship opportunities, as well as of those in the persecuted church.

- I think of isolated Christians in the Muslim world who rely on radio and TV broadcasts for their teaching and fellowship.
- I think of those who experience oppression because of their faith in the Lord Jesus, which has led to their church buildings being closed down or destroyed.
- I think of some are unable to meet with other Christians because they are being watched by the authorities, and because of fears of the loss of their livelihoods, or crippling fines, or their freedom, or far worse.

Are you better able to appreciate the experience of persecuted brothers and sisters who cannot meet for *these* kinds of fears? Please pray for such.

The Apostle Paul would, of course, have been astonished by what we are doing right now through various social media platforms. *This season of not being able actually to meet together will make a significant difference to the way in which we relate when we are able to resume public meetings.* We have all been changed in some way or other by the Covid-19 pandemic. So what might be implications for us when we regain our freedoms to meet together again?

- What / who are you missing in isolation?
- Are your attitudes to Christian fellowship changing? Am I worse or better for not being able to meet with Christians face to face?
- Is your own spiritual walk with God changing – for the better, or, for the worse?
- What things do you anticipate we might do better in Trinity as a result of this enforced period of lockdown?

We can all use this unusual season, an extended Lent if you like, to take stock and draw near to God who has promised *never to leave us nor forsake us.*

I want to leave you with some spiritual maxims that I have found have shaped my Christian life and, I hope, my ministry among you all. There isn't a specific passage of Scripture this time - which is very unusual for me. So I hope it will be all the more memorable for that.

## 1. The Truth is Jesus-shaped

The Apostle Paul has a beautiful little phrase in Ephesians 4.21: ‘you heard about Christ and were taught in him in accordance with *the truth that is in Jesus.*’ The Apostle John wrote in John 1.17: ‘grace and truth came through Jesus Christ.’ Indeed, Jesus is ‘the way, the truth and the life’ (14.6).

It is the life, teaching, death and resurrection of the Lord Jesus that tells us all that we need to know about the God who is for us and not against us. He is the *lens* by which we see God more clearly as Father. He is the *prism* through which the manifold and glorious grace and truth of God is revealed.

The Christian Faith is not merely a creed - a set of propositions just to be recited in church. It is about resting upon a person, and being restored to God through a relationship focused on Jesus.

- Jesus is the one at the centre of everything.
- Jesus is the one who is the focus of our identity.
- Jesus is the one whom we love above all.
- Jesus is the one in whose footsteps we seek to tread.

If we lose this understanding and emphasis we drift - we wander from the path. Let us with Paul be able to say: ‘Follow my example, *as I follow the example of Christ*’ (1 Corinthians 11.1).

It is Jesus who is the ultimate Revealer of God. Not even the Spirit within us can take Jesus’ place. For the role of the HS is to bring from heaven to earth the things to do with Jesus.

If you want to know whether a Christian will do you good, all you need to do is ask them about what the Lord Jesus means to them:

- ‘If you love me, keep my commands’ (14.15).
- ‘Whoever has my commands, and keeps them, is the one who loves me’ (14.21)
- ‘You are my friends if you do what I command’ (15.14).

There you have it. Relationship to Jesus or friendship with Jesus is about obedience to him. The Truth is Jesus-shaped. Jesus is what Truth looks like, and the Truth works in us to shape us to be like Jesus.

## 2. The Christian Life is Cross-shaped

The practicalities of Christian living take on a particular shape. Luke 14.27: ‘Whoever does not carry their cross and follow me cannot be my disciple.’ We can fail to realise just how common crucifixions were in Jesus’ day. They were *public* executions in the open air just as at Tyburn or at Gallows Corner.

To take up the cross and to carry it was to begin the last journey you would ever undertake in this life. The German pastor and theologian, Dietrich Bonhoeffer who was executed in April 1945, on Adolf Hitler’s personal order, once wrote: ‘*When Christ calls a man, he bids him come and die.*’ And people will be watching us, as they did Jesus, as take up and carry the cross of our LJC.

The remarkable thing about the cross of Christ is that single-handedly Jesus transformed an image of unspeakable horror and death into a symbol of life and purpose. He did this through sacrifice. What does the concept of ‘sacrifice’ mean to you and to me? We can talk in terms of

- a ‘wasted sacrifice’, or
- a ‘cheap sacrifice’, or
- a ‘meaningless sacrifice’.

But just as these phrases cannot be applied to the cross of Christ, so neither should they be applied to the sacrifices made for the sake of Christ and his gospel. Did the 21 Christian martyrs on that Libyan beach throw away their lives because they refused to deny Jesus? I refuse to believe that!

Christian discipleship is about dying to self and living to God. It is not about bearing our crosses of personal affliction and circumstance in a self-centred way. It is about sacrificial love. John can say ‘God is love’ in 1 John 4.8, but he immediately fleshes this out: ‘This is love: [... he] sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins.’

If God’s love is cross-shaped then Christian loving is also cross-shaped. The things that are hard – these are the things we are called upon to do, knowing that Christ has already done them for us. ‘Love one another as I have loved you’, Jesus said to his disciples. ‘Forgive one another just as God in Christ forgave you’ (Ephesians 4.32).

### 3. The Future is God-shaped

There are other maxims which I have such as ‘Every Christian a missionary’ but I leave you with this third and final one. *I find, especially as I get older and have more of my life behind me than before me - I find that I need and appreciate more the Christian virtue of hope.* That hope is based on the events of Easter Sunday.

We could take this maxim in two complementary ways. The first is that God shapes my future. Psalm 31.15: ‘My times are in your hands’. My future is being shaped within the creative and guiding hands of God.

The Apostle Paul puts it in another way in Philippians 1.6: ‘he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus.’ *We are a labour of love – a work in progress.* Perhaps a few of you are finding you now have time to complete a project or two. For example, Debbie has nearly finished her Millennium cross-stitch!

But there is a second way of looking at it. The future *is* God. It is not chaos, nor is it the title of a popular book by a physicist *The Never-ending Days of Being Dead*, when the very last star in the whole universe finally stops shining and the last scintilla of meaning is extinguished.

We read in 1 John 3.1-2: ‘See what great love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called the children of God! [...] *We know that when Christ appears, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is.*’ The vision of the Book of Revelation is centred upon the throne of God and of *the Lamb*. Both the new heaven and the new earth will belong to the loving God, when he comes to judge and redeem the world with righteousness and justice.

The Apostle Paul speaks of three things that will remain - faith, hope and love. It just so happens, and I did not set out to achieve this, that my last sermons at Trinity have focused on:

- *Faith*: especially what it means to be faithful to God and the gospel.
- *Hope*: the message of the empty tomb on Easter Sunday.
- *Love*: the shape that God’s love for us takes, and the shape our love for God takes.

## Conclusion

There we have it.

- The truth is Jesus-shaped.
- The Christian life is cross-shaped.
- The future is God-shaped.

I'd like to sign off using the words of the Apostle Paul himself at the end of 1 Corinthians : 'Be on your guard; stand firm in the faith; be courageous; be strong. Do everything in love. [...] The grace of the Lord Jesus be with you. My love to you all in Christ Jesus. Amen' (1 Cor 16.13-14, 23-24).