

Sunday June 21st: The Second Sunday of Trinity

Prayer: Faithful Creator, whose mercy never fails: deepen our faithfulness to you and to your living Word, Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Readings: Romans 6. 1b-11; Matthew 10.24-39

Reflection:

Last Sunday, you may recall, when focusing on the story of Jesus walking on water, Brian challenged us to follow the example of Peter and get out of the boat. He made the point that Peter was fine all the time he kept his eyes on Jesus, but when he saw how rough the weather was, he became afraid and began to sink, calling on Jesus to save him, which, of course, Jesus did, but not without questioning his faith and asking why he had begun to doubt.

Towards the end of his talk, Brian suggested that Jesus is calling us get out of our boat, to come to him, to step out onto the choppy waters of faith. Then, in one of her emails, Hazel challenged us to take a risk for Jesus in the coming week.

Getting out of our boat. Taking a risk for Jesus. I wonder how you've got on with taking up those challenges.

I suspect I'm taking a risk in what I'm going to say in this talk – some of it may upset some of you. I hope it won't, but if it does, don't stop listening. Do give me a hearing right to the end.

If we want to know what it means to get out of the boat, to get out of our comfort zone and to take a risk for Jesus, we only have to look at today's Gospel reading.

As Jesus sends his disciples out to visit the surrounding villages, proclaiming that the kingdom of heaven is near, he gives them the instructions that we've just heard read, but first he gives them a warning. They can't expect to be treated any better than he was. If the religious authorities accuse him of being in league with the devil, they'll certainly malign his followers. If they eventually put him to death, the same may happen to those who follow him.

But Jesus tells them not to be afraid of this. And the reason they are not to be afraid is because there is nothing covered up that will not be uncovered. Or to put it another way, “Be sure your sins will catch you out.” We’ve had some good examples of that in the last week or so, in relation to the “Black Lives Matter,” protests.

So, for example, the Bristol born philanthropist Edward Colston, as we now know, made much of his money by investing in the Royal African Company, a slave trading organisation headed up by Charles II’s brother, who later became James II. And when Colston sold his shares in the company, he sold them to William, Prince of Orange, when he became William III of this country. It was after selling his shares, that Colston began donating to charitable causes such as schools and hospitals in Bristol and London. Was that an act of contrition? Who knows? But as Christians we have to remember what Jesus said to those who brought him the woman caught in adultery, “Let the one who is without sin amongst you cast the first stone.” Maybe Colston learned from the case of Zacchaeus, the tax collector, who also made his money from exploiting others, and did penance by giving half his possessions to the poor and repaying four times over those whom he had cheated. Redemption is at the heart of Christianity.

Now that is not to say that we should turn a blind eye to what Colston and others have done, but rather than dwelling on the past, I think it better to look to what we can do now to institute justice for our black countrymen and women.

Now it may be that going on protest marches is not for you, particularly as it contravenes the social distancing requirements, so perhaps one way of taking a risk for Jesus would be to call out those who make racist remarks or crack racist jokes in front of you. Or maybe to write to your MP expressing concern at the fact that between April 2018 and March 2019, there were 4 police stop and searches for every 1,000 white people, compared with 38 for every 1,000 black people – that’s nearly ten times as many. Or just look back over your life and see whether there are times when you have acted or thought in a racist way, in, for example, your attitude to immigration, and seek God’s forgiveness and, if possible, that of the person you treated in this way.

Jesus then moves on to telling his disciples not to fear those who can kill the body, but not the soul, but rather to fear him who can kill both the body and the soul, something that Jesus comes back to when he says that anyone who does not take up his cross and follow him is not worthy of him and when he adds “whoever loses his life for my sake will find it.”

Whilst anyone can kill the body, only God has power over the soul, so pleasing God must take priority over pleasing those around us.

If we have to choose between conforming to the world and conforming to the values of God’s kingdom, then it must be God’s values every time. In this country, it’s unlikely that going against the values and norms of the country in which we live will cost us our lives, but in many places in the world today there are still Christians risking their lives rather than give up their faith.

One of those who have taken up the cross in following Jesus is Gao Zhisheng, a Chinese human rights lawyer who was first detained by the Chinese authorities in 2006. Before this, he was notable for frequently taking on human rights cases, and was known for defending religious minorities.

Gao’s committed involvement with such cases, he says, is strongly influenced by his Christian identity with its emphasis on morality and compassion.

Between 2006 and 2011 he disappeared many times and suffered beatings and torture. From 2011-2014 he served a prison sentence. He was released in August 2014, only to disappear again on 13 August 2017. His current whereabouts are unknown but, if he is still alive, he is believed to be in some form of detention.

Gao exemplifies what it means to find one’s life by losing it for Jesus’ sake.

Another way of understanding what is meant by “Those who find their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it” is well illustrated by the Biblical scholar and commentator, William Barclay, who writes as follows:

There is no place for a policy of safety first in the Christian life. The person who seeks first ease and comfort and security and the fulfilment of personal ambition may well get all these things – but they will not be a happy person: for they were sent into the world to serve God and their fellows....

The way to serve others, the way to fulfil God's purpose for us, the way to true happiness is to spend life selflessly, for only thus will we find life, here and hereafter.

Such a person was William Wilberforce, who, incidentally, was maligned in his own day for putting the interests of African slaves before campaigning on behalf of British workers who also lived in terrible conditions at home. Even when failing health forced him to give up his seat as an MP, he continued his support for the anti-slavery cause, including attending and chairing meetings of the Anti-Slavery Society. He died just three days after hearing that the passage of the Slavery Abolition Act through Parliament was assured.

Surely one of Jesus' most startling statements is his claim that he has not come to bring peace to the earth, but a sword. However, I don't think that the military reference is to be taken literally. Rather we are to understand that if it comes to having to decide between our family and Jesus, our loyalty to Jesus must come first.

I may have mentioned this before. If so, I apologise, but most of you will know that our daughter, Liz, and her husband are missionaries in Japan. Liz openly admits that initially she was reluctant to leave this country and still misses being part of family celebrations and other events such as grandparents' funerals.

And Anne and I miss being close to our grandchildren as they grow up. Skype and Zoom are no substitute for personal contact, as we are all discovering during the current lockdown.

But the call to serve Jesus in Japan had to take precedence over family ties. And that's one of the problems that Liz has encountered in Japan, where family loyalties are strong and where converting to Christianity can bring potential converts into conflict with their family when they refuse to participate in the family-based religious ceremonies of Buddhism or Shinto.

So, then, some hard challenges in today's Gospel, to go with Brian's challenge to get out of the boat and Hazel's challenge to take a risk for Jesus.

But there is one part of the reading that I haven't referred to. Jesus is at pains to tell us just how much God loves us. And he does this by comparing God's awareness of the fate of a sparrow, which in human eyes is next to worthless, with his concern for us, whom he knows intimately, down to the number of hairs on our head.

So despite what Jesus has said, we are not to be afraid – he says this no less than three times in this passage. And we are not to be afraid because in God's eyes we are of great value – of more value than many sparrows, who are also valued by God.

Just think of that, we are valued in God's eyes and fully known to God. And more than that, if we give God the priority in our lives – that's what this reading is about in brief – then in return we will be rewarded by God with a fully satisfying life, what St John refers to as "life in all its abundance," both in this world and even more so in the life to come. Amen.

Hymn: All to Jesus I surrender. *A recording with lyrics can be found using the following link (but you may need to skip the advert first).*

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pR4haH5dGrs>

Prayer Pointers.

For all scientists and researchers who are leading the way in understanding the Covid19 pandemic and communicate its gravity: We pray that they may be granted knowledge, wisdom, and a persuasive voice that Governments across the world will listen to.

For Christian missionaries throughout the world, especially in areas with high rates of Covid19 infection: We pray that the Holy Spirit may provide them with words of hope, and equip them to love and serve those around them.

For people who are facing redundancy and financial hardship in this current crisis and for those in work clubs and Job Centres who are doing their best to help them find new work: We pray that they may not lose hope, and inspire your church to generously support them.

For those with mental health challenges made worse because they feel isolated, anxious, and helpless: We pray that the church may reach out to them and provide them with every necessary support.

For our two congregations of St Mary's and St Francis. May we not be afraid to step out of our comfort zones and seek a new vision for our mission in West Wickham. May we learn by the Spirit to work together more closely and not be afraid to change – to take a risk for Christ.

Closing prayer: Loving Father, sustain us with your Spirit, that we may serve you here on earth until our joy is complete in heaven, and we share in the eternal banquet with Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.