Service for Sunday 30 August 2020

Call to worship

Psalm 1: 1-3 “Happy is the one who does not take the counsel of the wicked for a guide, or follow the path that sinners tread, or take his seat in the company of scoffers. His delight is in the law of the Lord; it is his meditation day and night. He is like a tree planted beside water channels; it yields its fruit in season and its foliage never fades.”

Hymn – At the name of Jesus

Prayer

Your name, O God, is worthy of worship and adoration by every people. Today we join with generations to praise and offer you honour and glory. Your presence refreshes us and enables us to grow in love for you and for our neighbours. Your freely gift of your Son Jesus for the world stuns us with a generosity we cannot comprehend. God of wisdom, we seek your discernment. God of love, we seek your forgiveness. God of holiness, we offer our adoration.

Jesus came to show the world your nature of truth and love. He offered grace to all. He called people to right living with you and died that we too might be holy, we rejoice in his goodness and grace. Amen.

Bible reading: Matthew 16: 21-28

Sermon

Well what a turnaround! Peter can’t have seen that coming. His life has taken such an extraordinary turn that he must be quite flabbergasted. In a relatively short time he has gone from the daily life of a fisherman to a journey of discipleship, including being commissioned and sent out on mission, seeing amazing miracles and being asked to perform them himself. He then returns to Jesus and hears much teaching about the Kingdom of God, he has a go at water-walking and then hears that he has a new name, he is to be Peter, the Rock, the foundation of the church (although at this point the word church does not yet have the significance it will centuries later). We imagine he must have been on cloud 9, thrilled with his promotion and struck by the new responsibility. And now this, ‘get behind me Satan, you are a stumbling block to me. You think as men think, not as God thinks’ (Matt 16: 23).

I don’t think that Peter’s motivation was wrong, not at all. If the person you had just come to think of as the Son of the living God, the Messiah, who has commissioned you, now starts to tell of his forthcoming death at the hands of religious leaders, I think we all would want to protest. Peter does not yet have an understanding of God’s purposes. And Peter does not realise that his words echo the sentiment of Satan in the temptations at the beginning of Jesus’ ministry. You will remember Satan offered Jesus the kingdoms of the world ‘on a plate’ if Jesus would only worship him. Peter expects that Jesus will become King too, but without a death. Would we not as well, be urging Jesus not to talk of death?

Peter, and we, need a new perspective. God’s perspective. God in Jesus says that there is a cross before a crown, that holding on to our lives is not actually the most important thing.

Perhaps not so much in the UK, but over the centuries and in other countries today the Christian life can be a very risky business. A church needs to be a safe environment for anyone who needs a place of healing, of restoration and refreshment. But that cannot be an end in itself. A church also needs to be place of commissioning and empowering disciples to take risks. If Jesus was willing to face a journey that led to his death on a cross and then his resurrection, so should we as a Church. This may not mean a literal death, but a dying to one’s own desires, you might say a series of small deaths – the loss of something that can seem precious – to reach resurrection.

For example, think of a new cruise liner, sitting in the harbour taking on passengers. It looks wonderful, everything is shiny and perfect. The passengers come on board, are given welcoming drinks, take a tour around the deck and go to their cabins to unpack. All is well. But if the ship never ventures out of the harbour into the risky open seas, it never fulfils its purpose and the passengers will be most disappointed to spend their fortnight in the harbour. At some point the ship must set sail.

We too must set sail, open ourselves up to taking a risk and venture with Jesus. We may not be called to walk on water, but we are called to let go of things that we have previously thought were unchangeable.

As Christians, like it or not, we are called to walk the way of the cross and it is a continual challenge to us. The safe human path of success looks attractive, but we are called to lives of self-denial. In first-century Palestine there was nothing metaphorical about a cross; it was the way that the Roman authorities executed many hundreds of criminals, in order to keep control. The invitation to ‘take up our cross’ is not an invitation to scan our own experience for something painful hat we might then call ‘my cross’, but to walk with Jesus in his vulnerability, refusing to condemn others or to assert our own perspective.

What does taking up your cross look like to you? Look at the words of ‘Will you come and follow me’ and see if there is anything you particularly identify with. Ask God to speak to you about an action you should take this week which means you renounce self to follow Jesus.

Hymn – Jesus calls us o’er the tumult

Prayer

There is a response to this prayer, when I pray ‘loving Lord’, will you please join in with ‘give strength and courage’.

We pray for those who carry the cross of persecution and oppression as they strive for what is just and right. Loving Lord. **Give strength and courage.**

We pray for those who carry the cross of anger and abuse, we have heard of increased domestic violence during lockdown, and we pray for partners and children who are victims of this. Loving Lord. **Give strength and courage.**

We pray for those who carry the cross of pain and suffering, those in hospital and nursing homes, those known to us. Loving Lord. **Give strength and courage.**

We pray for those who carry the cross of isolation and loneliness. We hear of so many people in our communities who are frightened to leave their homes, and of people in rural places who may not see another person for days. Loving Lord. **Give strength and courage.**

We pray for those who carry the cross of grief and mourning, be with them in their despair. Loving Lord. **Give strength and courage.**

Lord, we pray for your wisdom and encouragement to us and all those for whom we have prayed, as we seek to take up our cross and follow you faithfully. **Amen.**

The Lord’s Prayer

Hymn – Will you come and follow me?

Blessing