

Sermon for the Third Sunday after Trinity – 17 June 2018

Readings: Psalm 92, 1-8, 2 Corinthians 5, 6-10, 14-17, Mark 4, 26-34

May I speak in the name of God, who is Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

I'm sure most of you will be aware how difficult it is to drive through the centre of Oxford and so rarely go in by car. There are lots of restrictions and of course we are all law-abiding people, so we travel to town by bus or bicycle. So you can imagine my surprise, when recently cycling home from yet another expensive visit to Blackwells, that all too wonderful bookshop on Broad Street, and approaching the bollards that indicate no access for vehicles at the end of Broad Street by Boswell's store, I was faced with a car forcing its way through pedestrians, cyclists and buses, and through that narrow gap. I managed to wobble out of its way but the driver, perhaps seeing my look of horror, stopped and opened his window. I said 'you're not allowed through here'. He replied with a couple of words I won't repeat, followed by 'I'll drive wherever I like' and off he went. That young man will have already passed several very clear traffic restriction signs on his way to meet me and ignored them all, as he ignored me. 'I'll drive wherever I like'.

Now, I'm not having a go at motorists; there are plenty of cyclists who do not obey the Highway Code, and plenty of pedestrians too, come to that. There have always been selfish and thoughtless people in the world. But when you meet people like that, it so often brings up some unchristian thoughts in one's own mind. I wonder who else, if they had met that selfish young driver, would like me have had fantasies of some magic powers that instantly deflated his tyres or just threw a custard pie into his self-satisfied face. We all like to think that we should have all the answers; to have confidence in our own ability to face the world. But all too often that self-confidence, which in itself is no bad thing, leads us to thinking that we know better than everyone else and that we can do what we like, drive where we like, somehow believe that signs and laws don't apply to us. We know better. We become self-centred and selfish.

Paul, in his second letter to the Corinthians, writes at length about confidence, but it is not the sort of self-confidence that drives through no entry signs. If you remember, Paul says we are always confident 'for we walk by faith, not by sight.' Surely, he can't mean a confidence that fills us with an exaggerated sense of our own self-worth. What then does Paul mean when he says that we are confident for we walk by faith, not by sight?

Paul sees that faith does not need sight. We, who believe in God who is Father, Son and Holy Spirit, have faith in something we cannot see. What a muddle we would be in if we did only believe in what we could see, when our sight is filled with facts and 'alternative' facts, with so-called reality TV, which

is of course nowhere near reality but fills people with longing for artificial and self-centred lifestyles. We cannot see God but faith is about much more than seeing something and saying 'Oh yes. I've seen it; now I can tick the box.' Faith is about trusting in something – or someone - we cannot see or touch. If everything was obvious, we would not have to have faith because everything would be laid out for us and we would know exactly what to do in every circumstance, and what the consequences of every action would be. No, faith is not about 'certainty'; if we could always be certain, we would not need to trust in God's goodness and loving care for us.

Faith may not be certainty but neither is faith about doubt. Some people like to suggest that since faith means believing in things we can't see, we can't be sure about anything, especially all those difficult bits in the Bible about judgement, like the bit in the passage we have just heard where Paul says 'all of us must appear before the judgement seat of Christ, so that each may receive recompense for what has been done in the body, whether good or evil.' Not one of us is perfect so it is only natural that we might feel a bit frightened by the idea of appearing before the Son of God and accounting for our actions, and we'd rather not think about it. But being a bit worried about whether Jesus is going to punish us for what we imagine are our sins - and I say imagine because I suspect that Jesus might see sin differently from us, he is not a divine sort of policeman waiting to book us for exceeding the speed limit - that is not a sign of a lack of faith; in fact, it is quite the opposite. If we did not have faith, why should we be worried about it?

If this all seems very complicated, let's turn to our gospel reading. We know that Paul can be difficult to understand; he does not use parables and here are two of Jesus's parables that are really helpful. In the first, Jesus talks of how the farmer sows the seeds, the grain grows without him really understanding how, but he knows that it will, and then he harvests it at the appropriate time. In the second Jesus tells how the mustard seed, which is tiny, grows into a large bush.

The first thing to say is that Jesus's audience would have understood what he was saying much more easily than we can. Not only did nearly everybody work in some way related to agriculture in those days, but the parables are based on images in the Hebrew Bible which the audience would have known. The book of the prophet Joel, in chapter 3, has the image of the harvest and the sickle relating to the coming of the Lord to pour out his spirit upon Israel and make judgement upon his people. Isaiah chapter 40 has the phrase used by Jesus to start his second parable - with what can we compare the kingdom of God, whilst the image of that kingdom as the small plant growing into a great tree occurs in both Ezekiel and Daniel.

Jesus was emphasising to his Jewish audience that he represented the culmination of those prophecies and he was also saying that we cannot know exactly how God works but that he will work

through us and with us to create that harvest, to grow that greatest of all shrubs. Just as the farmer has faith that the seed will grow, so we can have faith that God will be at our side, even if we cannot see him, even if we do not know how this will happen; he will be with us as we face the challenges of trying to live according to his commandments in a world which apparently does not value them.

So we can always be confident, as Paul says, because we have faith that the seed will grow but it is not the sort of confidence that looks down on those less fortunate than ourselves, that pushes everyone else out of the way so we can get to the front of the queue, for, as Paul reminds his readers, Jesus died for all so that those who live might no longer live for themselves but for him who died and was raised for them. What our faith gives us is the confidence to proclaim the gospel message that we are commanded to love God above all else and to love our neighbour as ourselves, and it is because of that confidence that we can oppose all those who put their own interests before the rest of God's creation.

I hope you can see now that the story I began with is also a sort of parable; about how a society that emphasises not mutual love and responsibility, but the right of each individual to go their own way and maximise their own pleasure, will result in behaviour which is both physically and morally damaging. We don't have to look any further than the imminent extinction of so many species at the hands of humans, and the destruction of our environment in the pursuit of wealth to see where this leads.

So let us use that confidence which our faith gives us to stand up and make our voice - the voice of Jesus and his good news - be heard loud and clear, and to show the world through example and by action that there is a new creation to which we can all belong, a new and better world in which we can all give thanks to the Lord for his love and his faithfulness, and sing for joy without end.

Amen.