

## Trinity 11, Proper 16

Joshua 24:1-2, 14-18 – choose

John 6:56-69 – choose. Also Eucharistic references.

Ephesians 6:10-20 – how to do it when you have chosen.

Williams, Prince Charles, Betjeman, only true for him

It's spooky, as you might say, how the lessons for today chime in with my prevailing mood this week. I've returned from a holiday: not long enough, exhausted after finishing the ministry course, the emotion of ordination, the stress of moving house. Then family difficulties. Then I hear of other people's problems: parents, children, health, disease, addiction, unhappiness, and I begin to think how everyone is much more virtuous and holy than I am. Indeed, that's probably why it's good to have joined the ranks of the clergy, because I'm now probably more likely than before to get to heaven.

And there's the depressing stuff we hear from the wide world: the patent insincerity and lies of many politicians, the obvious wriggling out of responsibility, the abject failure to display humility, the dishonesty of some prominent captains of industry and commerce, the troubles of dealing with utility companies, the fat cats. And then the middle east where, as Lionel Blue said the other day, things seem to be ruled more by circulating testosterone rather than by honest discussion and listening.

There is plenty that could draw us down into despair. There's plenty to distract us from concentrating on God.

Oh you fool, Stanley. It is in dealing with problems like this that we meet God. God became man – and he had plenty problems of his own – notably persecution and torture. Job ranted at God. Amos ranted at indolent women – cows he called them. About one third of the psalms are rants at God. It's OK to rant at God. By so doing, the way forward often becomes clear because a rant like that can help to clear out rubbish that was blocking the view.

We must be honest with ourselves and with God. It's no use pretending to God that all is well when we feel like a good weep. On a very personal note, over recent months, I've had plenty opportunity to reflect on the huge change that I've put Susan and myself through. It hasn't all been easy, and bits of it continue to be trying. But what was the alternative? I'll tell you – the alternative was a kind of death. Death of an inner part of me that is beginning, I hope, to grow like a tender shoot towards the light.

And this, I think, is one of the ways that I interpret Jesus' words in the gospel reading we have heard – the importance of the spirit over the flesh – though I find this passage difficult to interpret. We need some guidance of how to go about doing this, how to decide on the appropriate course of action. And here Paul in Ephesians, a very famous extract, gives advice. The letter was probably written to several churches in what is now Turkey and is amongst the earliest Christian documents, about 60s AD. Some of Paul's letters were evidently written in response to particular circumstances. And some are frankly rants (Galatians), but this is a gentle and encouraging letter about what it takes to build up the church

Breastplate of righteousness

Gospel of peace

Helmet of salvation

Sword of the spirit

Constant watchfulness

Let's look at some of those words

helmet of hope

breastplate of faith and love necessary prerequisites for Hebrew salvation *shalom* (security, peace, victory)

Armour of new humanity, all in pursuit of truth – which is difficult: think of the Mirfield fathers in South Africa, Bonhoeffer in Germany, Sin in the Philippines, Romero in San Salvador, the Methodists in the industrial revolution, the sum priests in the twentieth, thingie in Iraq, thingie in Liverpool

To live according to Christian teaching is to seek truth, not self-deception:

Truth can divide

Truth can hurt before it heals.

Truth produce hatred

Truth can leave a person standing alone

Truth can appear to fail before it succeeds

Christians have sometimes, wrongly I think, used passages like this, (Thessalonians also) with military images to be aggressive, to colonise, to convert those of other faiths. And we could have an argument about whether or not they were right to do so (I think not). The armour, to my mind, is defensive. Remember, Paul was writing for people who saw Roman soldiers every day. Conquerors to be sure, but also guardians or a kind of peace. And centurions etc girded in armour to withstand attack, not to attack.

Defence against the evil spiritual powers, those niggling inner thoughts that so quickly multiply to eat away at our confidence. These are the spiritual diseases that make us think that what we need to solve our problems is another pair of shoes, or another bar of chocolate or another fix of alcohol, or sugar, or tobacco, or heroin, or cocaine, or shopping – an addiction like all the others. Some people have said that religion is an addition just like any other – and so well it might be, but if it is, and I'm not saying it is, on the whole it's less expensive and less damaging than others.

Paul is giving us advice about combating the evil that eats away at our core.

And probably the best tool in all of this is prayer. Paul calls us to prayer – pray without ceasing.

So for the final part of this address I want to share some thoughts about the nature of prayer,

It is not just sitting with your hands together in church.

Different ways of doing it (EMMTC SHEET)

Prayer can be almost anything.

Working

Doing your job well

Tending creation

Creating

God-directed thoughts

Working things out using your God-given intellect – ratiocination – discernment

It is useful to put this into the context of regular disciplined prayer when you can. Perhaps in the morning, or in the evening. Kelham on the bog. With others. We have daily prayer in the mornings and most evenings at Wirksworth, and certainly I'd be happy to join you here if there was some of you that wanted to meet for this. The problem with regarding everything as prayer, is that if prayer is everything it then becomes nothing. But do not for one moment imagine that you have to adopt a special posture or attitude or state of mind. Just listen to God, and for most of us, since we aren't aware that God speaks directly to us, that means listening to our innermost thoughts. Take time to sit in silence, or lie, or whatever, to listen to what your 'conscience' or whatever is telling you. That is a form of prayer. Listen don't babble on. Be silent.

Used to be nervous and uncertain

But relax into talking to god

Sometimes you need to shout and rant at god - DO IT

What are you praying to and what for

If you are asking for specific things, are you bargaining with god

Is there

Anthony Bloom

CS Lewis

Raymond Raynes – focuses us

But best of all, just LISTEN. Be silent. It is useless to go looking for God, Just be and let it happen.

Silence

So, listening to God, and girding yourself with the defensive armour of righteousness, peace, knowledge and wisdom, watchfulness, we will be better equipped to deal with these feelings of dejection (spiritual enemies) when things are getting on top of us, as they do.

And let us use each other – the church – for mutual support. See the church as the nourisher, the provider of the bread of life literally in HC and metaphorically in learning and exploring. The womb in which we grow and develop.

Otherwise, to what can we turn? Communism didn't work, materialism and capitalism are showing themselves as deeply corrupt, the culture of fame is about as sustaining as rice paper, if that.

So put on your armour, sisters and brothers, and pray without ceasing in whatever manner suits you. And don't let anyone tell you that your way of doing it is wrong.

Our only hope is accepting that we are all part of the mystical body of Christ. As Peter says, there is no alternative.

The church is not the mass of saints, but the mass of sinners who repent.