

12th February 2017
Third Sunday before Lent
All Saints, Turkdean
Revd David Ford, Rector

1 Corinthians 3.1-9
Matthew 5.21-37

There are still three weeks to go before the start of Lent but from the tone of our readings this morning, you could be forgiven for thinking that Lent is well underway, such is the emphasis on sin and repentance.

The bible is not always easy reading, especially when Paul and Jesus use contemporary themes and stories to illustrate eternal truths. We can find ourselves fixated on their illustrations, not on their central message.

Both readings focus on the consequences of failing to live up to the admittedly very high standards of the gospel.

Paul's first letter to the Corinthians is addressed to a troubled church community where disagreement is rife and where different factions have sided with different Christian leaders – Paul and Apollos.

Paul's message is tough. He accuses his hearers of behaving as if they didn't know the Lord Jesus, and declares them immature in the faith and lacking in spiritual wisdom and strength. Paul calls his hearers back to focusing on God as the source of all growth in faith, not Paul, not Apollos, and he ends by reminding the church in Corinth of the inherent holiness of each follower of Christ: we are God's servants, working in God's field.

Sadly 2,000 years of church history prove that Paul's words have not been heeded. The worldwide Church of God is defined by its factions – Catholic, Protestant and Orthodox – to name only the three main groupings. In this sense the church is simply behaving like the rest of society as vested interests compete to ensure the survival of one particular understanding of truth or another.

The challenges of living with difference do not solely apply to the worldwide church of course; they apply to our national church and at times even to our diocese and perhaps within this benefice too. Difference is part of the character of being human; it is a gift for us to treasure and celebrate, and because of that, it frequently becomes the source of much pain and division too.

In our gospel reading Jesus provides a model for us to follow so that as his disciples we do not live as others live; a model that enables us to live lives infused with the gospel values and priorities that Jesus espoused.

At the heart of this teaching Jesus calls us to commit ourselves to reconciliation with those from whom we are estranged, and to consistency and honesty in all our relationships.

I wish this were easy, but, as we all know from all our own individual lives, it is not.

Many of us succeed for years in glossing over relationship breakdowns in our personal, family and

professional lives. I often wonder if the English are the supreme perfectors of this. We have a wonderfully subtle way of internalising our struggles whilst managing to sustain for others a quite different, optimistic and positive outward version of ourselves. We are afraid of appearing weak and vulnerable, and yet this is precisely the condition in which Christ can meet us and make us whole; moreover it is precisely through meeting Christ in our vulnerability that we can be transformed into agents of his Kingdom, bringing peace and wholeness to others through our own experience.

Using our own stories for the benefit of the gospel is an important aspect of Christian discipleship that we often overlook – and yet the telling of stories forms the foundation for Jesus' entire ministry. We shouldn't really be surprised that our stories can prove as transformative as the stories Jesus told.

Part of my story is the ten years I spent as a member of the Religious Society of Friends, or Quakers, for whom Jesus' teaching about oaths remains a fundamental principle of their faith. Quakers will not swear on the Bible, not through disrespect for

scripture, but because their word is guaranteed as sound simply by virtue of being Christian. Their word is 'Yes Yes' or 'No, No', because their word can be trusted as their word.

This is such an important witness for this age; an age in which post truth politics and alternative facts are challenging the very notion that truth has a place in our political life.

Trust is the foundation of all relationships – micro and macro from the personal to the international, and most importantly of course, trust is the foundation of our relationship with God.

The moment our trust in God wavers, then the building blocks of our life begin to feel unstable. The moment our trust in God is restored, then optimism returns and the impossible begins to look feasible.

It would be churlish of me to suggest that trust in God is straightforward, not least because of the weight of evidence in the world that points to the inactivity of God.

Yet it is possible, and here are three suggestions to encourage you in this trust.

The first is to accept the Word of God that we are called into being for a divine purpose, that our lives have value and meaning and that our creator loves us. Acceptance, for which we might also substitute the word submission, puts us into the correct relationship with God to enable us to trust in Him. A little like getting on an aircraft; we trust in the capabilities of the crew; but taxiing for take off is not the moment to enter a debate into their qualifications and competencies – trust must reign. So it is in life – we must trust God.

Secondly, I find it helps to remember that although our lives are precious to God, they form a part of a larger story of God's revelation to humankind, the full picture of which we cannot and never will see. The image of each of us as a jigsaw piece helps here for we are all interconnected, all needed for the unity and success of the whole, but from the viewpoint of our individual jigsaw pieces it is quite impossible for us to see the finished picture. It is enough however to

recognise the importance of the part we play and to believe in the beauty of the whole.

Finally I believe it makes a difference to join with others and share with others the story of our faith journeys. It is difficult to be a Christian in isolation from others and that, of course, is one reason we come to church. Yet there is benefit from going a little deeper than this too. And that is the rationale behind our Lent study course this year as we seek to explore our faith through the universally accessible media of images and art. Details are on the noticeboard. Please consider coming along to one or more evenings.

When I look back over my faith journey these past 30 years or so I am conscious of the amazing journey I've had but also I am aware of those who have remained faithful to me throughout the twists and turns of that sojourn.

And so my final thought is to encourage you in prayer and to pray for one another. We may not know how prayer works, and we may dispute the extent to which prayers are answered in the way we would

wish, but...despite that, prayer does make a difference and to be upheld by others in prayer is a valued gift we can all offer silently to one another.

Amen.