Sermon – Trinity 13 Team Service

Can you recall where you were on 11th September 2001? The day is very clearly etched in my memory. I was in the centre of Birmingham at a trade show discussing the incredible idea that one day we might pay for items in shops by passing a card in front of a terminal. Equally fantastical scenes were appearing on all the TV screens as the terrible events at the World Trade Centre unfolded.

We all know from our considerably more mundane lives, that how we initially respond to a problem determines future events for a very long time. The terrible response of the West to 9/11 – the protracted wars in Afghanistan and Iraq – has, at times, played well to domestic audiences. This week, with the tragic conclusion of the international withdrawal from Afghanistan, we have seen again how ultimately it is domestic politics that drives international events, despite all the hyperbole that tries to suggest otherwise. Joe Biden will survive the tragedies of this week because he has American public opinion on his side. America no longer wishes to lead the world as it has tried to do since the second world war. Isolationism is back.

I could keep all of this at a distance from me, if it wasn’t for Joe Biden’s use of his faith to defend his actions. Not for a moment do I question the integrity of the President’s Roman Catholicism, nor do I wish to undermine how that faith has helped him through the very traumatic events of his own life; I’m sure it’s been his saviour. But the use of faith to prop up questionable political decisions has always sat uneasily with me. Our faith should never be used in this way.

Dip into almost any book in the Old Testament and you won’t find it hard to find faith being misused. Jo Biden has plenty of precedents. Our faith, though, is not a source book of handy quotations to draw upon to bolster our rhetoric when our actions lack integrity. Politicians – even those with the most genuine of faiths – can fall foul of one of the very first principles upon which our faith is based. And the principle I have in mind is the one we call repentance; saying sorry; accepting that we get things seriously wrong; the recognition that perfection eludes mere mortals; that truth rooted in the vulnerability of personal humility really matters. Life is not about us, it’s about God.

As it happens, the Psalm set for today offers us brilliant guidance though the Psalmist sets the bar very high. Psalm 15: “Lord, who may dwell in your tabernacle…whoever leads a blameless life and does is what is right…there is no guile upon his tongue; he does not heap contempt upon his neighbour…”

And of course, our neighbour includes everyone, not even simply those to whom we are indebted.

When we turn to our gospel reading – the well-known battle of wits between Jesus and the Pharisees over the food laws – we come across the following revealing phrase which sums up so much about the complex misuse of religion: “You abandon the commandment of God and hold to human tradition.”

The commandments of God – love God and love one another – were fast reduced to human laws in order to provide shape to definable communities. Yet these commandments, upon which our faith is based and from which the Christian tradition emerged, were always universal. They were never intended to define difference and segregate neighbours; the God of the whole of creation could never possibly have done that. The people of Israel sadly lost sight of their divine calling to be exemplars for the world and became exclusivist instead. Christianity followed in their footsteps the moment the emperor converted and our faith too became a tool of the state.

Yet we can choose to hold fast to our faith in the way intended and this surely is our calling. The letter of James remains one of my favourites for its straightforward advice. James might not have the beauty or complexity of Pauline theology but there are times when we simply need to hear what it says on the tin. What a confusing world we would live in if everyday instructions on how to use domestic appliances were always presented in poetic verse. Tell us straight James what we need to hear. Let us have it: “let everyone be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger; for your anger does not produce God’s righteousness…”

But the words I want to close with reflecting upon are these from the end of today’s epistle: “Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to care for orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world.”

In other words, the practical really matters. But James is saying more than that too: be conscious of how susceptible we are to the culture that surrounds us; how easily our faith can be warped by the powers of a culture whose objectives are sometimes diametrically opposed to our faith’s. It’s not hard to name these: consumerism; exploitation of humanity and the planet; discrimination of every kind; the worst excesses of capitalism; greed; self-centredness; the lust for power in all its forms.

Sometimes it feels easy to be a Christian in a country that still boasts the symbols of our faith in every town and village; a country that continues to fall back on our faith tradition at those great moments of national mourning or celebration. But in truth, this is where our faith is toughest, as we try to express our faith genuinely, standing both with and apart from the very cultural tradition that continues to give us permission to live life faithfully.

This is when we must return to the scriptures, rather than to our traditions, and immerse ourselves afresh in the Living Word that crosses not only all continents and cultures, but all time and space too. Uncommonly perhaps, all the readings set for today speak with one voice and so I close with the words of Moses from today’s reading from Deuteronomy: “You must neither add anything to what I command you nor take away anything from it, but keep the commandments of the Lord your God.”

A simple instruction, difficult to live up to, but try we must.

Amen.