**Sermon – Trinity 20 2021 (Proper 24)**

The murder of David Amess symbolises so much more than the death of a hard-working, constituency MP. We mourn with deep heartache for his family and friends; but we mourn too for what we might now lose in terms of ready access to our MPs; we mourn for what his death says about our polarised, divisive world; for what it says about radicalisation and our loss of a moral compass; we mourn too for what David Amess’ death says about the quite dreadful state of mental health in this country. Above all we mourn that in the five years since this last happened – the murder of Jo Cox – nothing appears to have improved to make such terrible events less likely today or, fearfully I suggest, tomorrow. As a nation we stumble from one tragedy to another, unable to grasp the essence of our problems, unable to face the difficult truth that these events point to systemic, corporate failings of culture and morals and not simply individual waywardness.

Our inability to ask the right questions is not a modern phenomenon known only to politicians seeking to defend their policies whilst dancing around the probing inquisitiveness of radio interviewers. One glance at this morning’s gospel reading reminds us that first century disciples often got it monumentally wrong as well. James and John, their egos preceding them, seek to get the upper hand over their peers by asking Jesus for the right to sit closest to him in glory. One can only imagine that the normal seating pattern for James and John at supper was to be placed several settings removed at the other end of the table. James and John wanted their turn to be intimate and bend the ear of their Master at supper, and at one level, why ever not?

Jesus though reminds them of the enormity and inappropriateness of their request, and when the other disciples learn of this, anger surfaces amongst them. How human and familiar are the gospel stories! Few families are spared such domestic squabbles.

There’s another angle to this though that is worth noting. It is found in Jesus’ own question to James and John. “What is it you want me to do for you?”, Jesus asks.

This question always makes me chuckle because the disciples don’t hesitate to reply; they never spot the deep irony in Jesus’ tone of voice. The point being that Jesus rarely does anything for the disciples. Now I haven’t undertaken a detailed search of the gospels to justify this particular argument, but Jesus doesn’t tend to do things for the disciples at all. He heals and feeds thousands and heals some of the disciples before they respond to Jesus, but once a disciple, Jesus doesn’t generally – please correct me afterwards if I’m completely wrong on this – Jesus doesn’t generally do anything for the disciples at all. One exception I can think of is Peter being saved when he attempts to walk to Jesus across the lake.

That responsibility, doesn’t rest with Jesus but with the disciples, is reinforced at the end of the passage when Jesus emphasises servanthood as the route to fullness of life, not simply in terms of how the disciples should relate to one another but in terms of wider society relationships too. Jesus strikingly emphasises that the government of the Gentiles is all wrong. Rather than people being ruled over by people who simply exploit them – and I for one see echoes here for us in our culture today – society should, instead be modelled around a culture of reciprocal service.

The very final words of our gospel reading – the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many – gives us the key to making sense of all of this and links us straight back to our first reading from Isaiah, that beautiful prophetic passage in which the Messiah is portrayed as our rescuer, despite all our shortcomings and despite the evilness of the world that was to lead to Jesus’ death.

Just as Jesus didn’t rush to do whatever his disciples wanted, so God doesn’t rush in to solve the world’s problems today – the reason being because that was all sorted, once and for all, through Jesus on the cross.

If we don’t like the world as it is, please don’t expect some supernatural, divine intervention to sort it out for you. Jesus did his bit on the cross and through the gift of the Holy Spirit we are now commissioned and equipped to continue God’s work. Frankly, if we don’t like what is happening to our culture, our democracy, our community, our church, then the solution lies right here – God with us – nowhere else.

So, what is stopping us. Why will our trajectory downwards as a society continue for some time yet?

There is a phrase that came to my mind recently, whether it’s my phrase or not I’m unsure and I certainly would credit it to another if I knew, that I think sums up the challenge perfectly. It is very simply this: western Christians, by and large, are a people *paralysed by privilege.*

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Whatever your personal circumstances, we are all – relatively speaking – very, very privileged. I don’t mean this necessarily in material terms though that may apply. I mean it much more in the sense that by any measure we are on the side of the scales labelled *advantaged* rather than *disadvantaged*.

With advantage, comes a paralysis that prevents us from engaging fully with the struggle for the spiritual and moral heart of this country, if not for the future of the world. I don’t say any of this with the intention of being critical of individuals, nor in the expectation that we will leave church this morning and walk together to Glasgow for COP26.

But as people *paralysed by privilege,* we feel the struggles of the world at second hand. Climate change, for example, is not yet affecting us in the way it is affecting island communities in the pacific. Most people in this country probably welcome the temperature going up a degree or two. Taking another tack, we live in a relatively homogenous community with little communal strife. And most of us can protect ourselves from pretty severe economic shocks, though the fuel price increases are going to really hurt us all including us as churches.

Even when we feel impelled to do something we’re often not quite sure what to do and for most of us direct action doesn’t fit our understanding of how to bring about change – though Jesus employed it in the temple of course.

As Christians we deplore the moral and social direction in which our country is hastening; as Christians we know that the hope and joy and peace, we have in believing in Christ contains all the ingredients we need to turn things around.

But when it comes to the ‘how’ we truly struggle.

May we turn the words of today’s collect prayer into action: *by the spirit’s gifts equip us to live the gospel of Christ and make us eager to do your will, that we may share with the whole creation the joys of eternal life.*

The world’s problems are immense. Yet, God’s power is infinite. May we continue to grow in trust and confidence to speak gospel truth to secular power. **Amen.**