



ST ANDREW'S CHURCH

SANDFORD-ON-THAMES

RECENT SERMONS

Mark 8.31-8 Second Sunday of Lent: 28th February 2021 Rev. Teresa Morgan

I have to admit that when I turned to today's gospel, a couple of days ago, and read, '*If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me*', my first thought was, 'Oh, don't we have enough problems this year?' I felt a bit like St. Teresa of Avila, who, in a time of suffering, complained bitterly to God. God said, 'But this is how I treat all my friends!' and Teresa retorted, 'Then no wonder you have so few of them!'

But somehow just thinking that made me hear Jesus' saying again. Not as 'take up your cross,' but as 'take up your cross.' Whatever it is that you are already bearing—really take it up, and walk with it.

This was of reading what Jesus says seems to fit quite well into Lent. Last week, we heard how Jesus was tempted by Satan in the desert. And we all know, from our own experience, what Jesus also knew, that the real temptations in this life are not things we go out into the desert to look for, in a spirit of heroism. The real temptations are the weaselly little things that are already in our lives, like selfishness and lack of compassion and a taste for power, and Lent is the time when we are challenged to face those things and really grapple with them.

In a similar way, we all already have crosses to bear. Maybe we're not well, or not happy, or in a job that doesn't nurture us. Maybe somebody close to us is making our life difficult—or we're making our own life difficult by being angry, envious, or unkind.

In ordinary times, many of us spend quite a bit of time and energy avoiding facing these burdens. Keeping busy to distract ourselves. Grumbling to let off steam, without changing anything. Self-medicating with chocolate or Netflix, or ... pick your preferred narcotic. But in Lent, Jesus invites us to take a hard look at the things that burden us, and then to take them up, and follow him. Not in a spirit of masochism, but because, as Jesus also knew in the desert, you have to face the evils of this world to know them and not to be ruled by them. And it's only by really facing our crosses and taking them up that we can hope eventually to put them down and save our life.

Taking up our crosses, in this sense, is a very varied exercise, because the things that burden us are very varied, and in general, the evils of the world are very varied.

Maybe our cross is physical suffering, and we're being called to reflect more deeply on our own fragility, and the fragility of everybody—and with that, the incredible power of spirit that runs through us and lightens our lives in spite of our own limitations. Maybe our cross is some aspect of our circumstances, and we are being called to reflect on what we could do to change them—for ourselves, and perhaps for other people too. There are as many crosses as there are things wrong with the world, and as many ways of taking them up as there are ways of working to make the world better.

So this Lent, I encourage you to look at the crosses you are bearing—and there may well be more than one—and pick just one, and really take it up. Look at it; think about it; think about what it is showing you about yourself and the world.

And think about what it would take to make this cross what the physical cross was for Jesus Christ: not, in the end, a burden that led to death, but a power that redeemed the world and brought it to eternal life.

Because the promise of the gospel is that if we follow Christ, then the way of the cross is only one stage on a much longer road, that ends not on Golgotha, but in the glorious life of the kingdom of heaven.

Prologue of John's Gospel 7th February 2021 Rev. Teresa Morgan

The Prologue of John is one of the clearest expressions of one of the most mysterious ideas in the New Testament: the pre-existence of Christ, before he was 'made flesh' as a human being.

It's not a topic we think about very often in church, and when we do, many people find it difficult. The idea that Jesus of Nazareth, who lived and died, was a man of God, a man from God, and even God with us, is a cornerstone of our faith. The idea that God raised Jesus from the dead and received him into heaven is harder for some to believe – but the sense that Christ is with God, and still with us, and that we are in his hands and in his care until the end of the age, is something most Christians live with, in faith, every day.

But, we may wonder, why would we believe that Christ existed before he was born, and took part in creation? To many people, it just doesn't seem necessary.

It may help to bear in mind that, in the world of the first century, people thought of two main types of heavenly being. There were gods and other divinities who at some point visited earth: perhaps to test people's piety, deliver a message, or help them. And there were exceptional human beings who were taken up to heaven after they died, like Abraham, Hercules, or the Roman emperors.

It also helps to remember that when the apostles began preaching, the Christ that they called people to put their faith in was, first of all, the risen Christ, in heaven.

So early preachers had two possible ways of thinking about Christ. Some saw him as a man of God who was taken up to heaven. But there was a difficulty: human beings who were taken up to heaven were not usually envisaged as taking a very high place there. They became demi-gods, or angels, or simply great souls. For his followers, Jesus Christ was much more than that. He was the presence of God with humanity, and humanity with God. He made it possible for imperfect humanity to be reconciled with God, and eventually for all his followers to follow him to heaven. To be as great a heavenly figure as Christians recognized Christ as being, some people thought he must have been with God – been God – from the beginning. And so the idea of pre-existence developed.

People described the pre-existent Christ in various ways. For some, he was God's Word – God's speech-act, which brought the world to life, just as Jesus Christ later brought humanity to new life. Or he was the Wisdom of God, that reaches out to teach human beings how to be as God created and longs for them to be. Or he was the light that enlightens everyone.

Well, you may be thinking, this is all very well, but does it matter to us? I think it does.

Christians have always understood that Christ is not only the Saviour and Lord of his people, but also brings all of us with him, to heaven, to share his glory. And in Jesus's own day – and still today – that is a rare idea. In many ancient traditions, there are great individuals who go up to heaven (or somewhere similar), but they don't take everyone with them. What makes Jesus unique, paradoxically, is that he represents and embodies us all. As a human being, he makes it possible for us to be like him, and, as God, he brings us all to be with him.

Epiphanytide 24th January 2021 Rev. Teresa Morgan

I've been thinking a lot this week about the sadness of closing churches. Churches are places of so much nurture and nourishment. They feed our hearts and minds – and eyes and ears. They teach and inspire us to care for one another. They hold our prayers, and we entrust our hopes and fears to them. When we come into a church, we come to a place where we know we are known, loved, and valued. In church we can dare to be our best selves. Those are rare and precious things.

And churches remember. They remember our friends and neighbours who are no longer with us. They link us to Christians before us, right back to Jesus' disciples.

But that reminds me that very early Christians didn't have any buildings of their own. Right up to the fourth century, if they did build a church, it was liable to be looted or destroyed. They must have felt their lack of holy places, when there were temples and synagogues all around them, but they made a virtue of it.

St Paul says to the Corinthians, 'Do you not know that you are the temple of God, and the spirit of God lives in you?' (1 Cor. 3.16). In the second century, Clement of Alexandria says, 'Christ builds his temple in people, so that he can establish the home of God in humanity'. And for Origen of Alexandria, anywhere Christians meet becomes not only a holy place, but a place where the saints and angels gather overhead and join in their worship.

We may yet have to close Sandford church, but if we do, it will still be here, holding our prayers and waiting for us. And we can take encouragement from early Christians, who knew that, wherever they were and wherever they worshipped, God was with them, and, in them, God was in the world. And whenever they said their prayers, angels and saints gathered overhead and worshipped with them.

We can also reflect that if, like Paul's Corinthians, we are God's temple, then all the holiness that lives in a church also lives in us, as we go about our daily lives. We make the holiness of holy places portable, and, if we are faithful, then the people we meet – in person or via technology – may even meet God in us.

That does not seem a bad aspiration for the Epiphany season, the season of showing Christ to the world.

Holy Innocents' Day 2020 Rev. Teresa Morgan

I hope you are having a very happy week, with plenty of celebration – as well, probably, as some frustration and worry. It's Christmas 2020-style....

And part of Christmas, is that tomorrow is the Feast of the Holy Innocents, which nearly always falls on a day when most of us aren't in church, and which tends to get a bit overlooked, in the middle of the festive season.

Even Matthew's gospel doesn't make much of it. The story of King Herod killing all the male children around Bethlehem two years old and under, to try to get rid of the newborn King of the Jews – it's three verses, tucked in between the much more famous stories of the Coming of the Magi and the Flight into Egypt.

And there is something bitterly appropriate about that. In every crisis in history – every war, every moment of change – children are always the most vulnerable, and when they suffer, it is always under-reported.

But this year is one to remember the Holy Innocents. Because there have been many tragic stories of the suffering brought by the pandemic, but nothing has been more shocking than the reports of how child abuse has increased – physical, emotional, sexual abuse; murder. Stressed parents and carers, volatile and violent people locked down together, disruption in social services, children out of school, people spending hours a day online – they’ve all contributed. And this terrible story has hardly ever hit the headlines.

And that, among much else, raises a question about Matthew. Because we usually assume that the only good thing about this story is that, historically, it probably didn’t happen. We think this partly because we know a lot about King Herod, but there is no other record of this massacre, and partly because we think that Matthew created the whole of this birth narrative to show how Jesus is part of the whole history of Israel.

The story of the Innocents looks back to the destruction of Jerusalem in war in the 6th century BC, and before that, to the Book of Exodus, where the Egyptian Pharaoh tried to kill all the male children of the Israelites, because he thought they were doing too well in his country. But the mother of Moses hid her son in a basket in the reeds on the edge of the Nile, where he was found and brought up by the Pharaoh’s daughter. Echoing that story is one way in which Matthew says that Jesus is going to be like Moses, but even greater.

The story also pre-echoes some of Jesus’s prophecies, as an adult. ‘I have come not to bring peace, but a sword’ (Mt. 10.34). And, before salvation comes, ‘you will hear of wars and rumours of wars ... there will be famines and earthquakes ... woe to pregnant women and nursing mothers in those days’ (24.6, 19).

Matthew knows well what we have been reminded of, this year: that in times of crisis, children are always among the most vulnerable.

But in light of our experience this year, I think we should pause, and consider the possibility that the story of the Holy Innocents is not just a way of saying that Jesus is greater than Moses, and not just a pre-echo of Jesus’ prophecies of the end time. Because we do know enough about Herod to know he was more than capable of doing something like this. He saw threats to his power everywhere, and he ordered the murder of scores, if not hundreds of people, including one of his wives, three of his sons, and forty-five members of the religious council in Jerusalem.

So Matthew’s story may not have happened when and where he describes, but it is not unbelievable that it happened somewhere, at some point, when Herod saw some threat to his power. And if it did, nothing is more likely than that historians didn’t record it, because the suffering of children hardly ever hits the headlines.

So I would like to suggest, this Christmas, after the year we have had, and bearing in mind that the next few months may also be very difficult, that we take this story of the Holy Innocents especially to heart.

And three thoughts emerge from it, for me.

One, is that, even though this is a tragedy, there is also ray of hope in it – and in the Exodus story that it looks back to. Because in each story, one child was saved by the courage and resourcefulness of his parents. That reminds us that – although there are children in our country whose lives are horribly vulnerable – there are also many whose lives are saved and made safer by the courage and resourcefulness of their parents, grandparents, foster parents, teachers, or social workers. So this day is also a day to remember and honour all of them.

And it's also a day for the rest of us, who don't have direct responsibility for vulnerable children, to think about whether we can do more to support the people who do. Whether personally, or through local initiatives like foodbanks, or by holding to account the services that work with children and the politicians who fund their work.

Last, but not least, when we are thinking about our charitable giving – as individuals or as a church – this year might be a really good year to support some children's charities.

Because Jesus Christ was a baby, and a child, in a world in crisis. And if people had not saved him, he wouldn't have grown up to save his people. And when you get right down to it, that's really why Matthew tells this story.

He understands that the God who calls us, in Christ, is calling us not just to put our trust in God and be saved, but to join with God in saving ourselves by saving each other. Because, Matthew understands, it is in giving that we receive; and in forgiving that we find ourselves forgiven; and it is in giving life to others that we become part of eternal life.

Christmas Day 2020 Rev. Teresa Morgan

Well, we made it! We have sent cards and wrapped presents and decorated and shopped and cooked – and we've made it to Christmas Day. Possibly a bit tired – but I hope happy. Though most of us are also probably a bit worried, or sad about family and friends we can't spend Christmas with. And most of us are looking back at a difficult year, and some of us have lost people we loved.

So, many of us greet Christmas morning, this year, with slightly mixed feelings. But however we feel, and whatever else is going on – we are here. And we have many reasons for being here: faith; hope; tradition; community. Christmas carols! But one reason I am certain we all share: the feeling that we are welcome here, in this house of God.

We welcome each other, and framing and empowering our welcome, is a much bigger one. Which says to every one of us, however you are feeling, and whatever is going on in your life, you are at home here. Here you are known, inside and out, and loved, and treasured. By your neighbours, and, above all, by God and Jesus Christ.

Because one way to describe what we celebrate today is to say that God so loved the world that he sent his Son to make it home. To make this world, which for Adam and Eve and their descendants was a place of exile, of hard graft and a steep learning curve, into the place where God and humanity are reunited: where, as the Book of Revelation says, God makes his home with his people, and we are at home with God.

It's pure gift.

And it's the irony of the season, that we prepare for it for weeks, and when it comes, we're so busy giving and receiving our own presents we're rarely completely ready to receive God's.

But, as it happens, I don't think that matters too much. For one thing, all the gifts we give and receive are Christmas are practice – practice in love, and practice in grace – *charis* – that beautiful word in Greek which means both generosity and gratitude. We are all practising grace on one another!

And, anyway, I'm not sure we could ever be completely ready for a gift from God. Any more than new parents like Mary and Joseph can be completely ready for their first child. Love, and grace, and bringing up a baby, are three things we grow into as we practise them.

And we can and do practise them, and hope to get better at them, not least because the grace of God in Christ is the one present we get every year that we don't open.

This is the present that opens us.

Because the Word of God, as John calls him, who comes into the world, full of grace and truth, is the Jesus who will grow up to say, Don't be afraid.

Come to me, when you are tired and burdened, with all the damage you've received, and the damage you've done, and put it all down here.

Come to me, and let yourself be known, inside and out, and treasured, and loved.

And in the warmth of that love, let your heart open like a flower, and feel yourself growing and flourishing.

Because, as John's gospel says, Jesus Christ came that you should have life, and have it more abundantly – life in you, and working with you, until your heart and mind and arms are as wide open as God's and Christ's own, and wherever you are in your own life, you know you are also, always, at home in the house of God.

A very happy Christmas to you. Amen