

## Four Aspects of the Christian Way - 14 Nov 2010

*Isaiah 65:17-25; A Song of Isaiah; 2 Thessalonians 3:6-13; Luke 21:5-19*

In this parish we normally follow the lessons set in the lectionary each Sunday. There is a good reason for this as it means we are bound to cover all aspects of the faith over the three year cycle of the lectionary. This stops us just considering the bits we like, are comfortable with, or our pet theme. This Sunday I have drawn the short straw and been presented with a set of, for me, uncomfortable readings that challenge again the way I live. So what I plan to do is take each of the four readings in turn and consider what it says. They each reflect a different aspect of the process of living the Christian life here and now. I hope they will together at the end.

The first one I will address is the reading from Isaiah 12 we used as the Psalm and which we use every Monday morning here at morning prayers. This psalm is a hymn of praise to God:

*Behold, God is my salvation: I will trust and will not be afraid;*

*For the Lord God is my strength and my song: and has become my salvation.*

*With joy you will draw water: from the wells of salvation.*

Here is someone who is responding to God in great joy. He has found God and knows him. 'I will trust and will not be afraid' he says. And you do not trust someone you do not know. Here is someone giving voice to the gratitude of the human heart for the living experience they have had of the mercy of God.

Such sentiments have a particular religious value for an age like ours which continually needs to be confronted with its debt to the goodness of God. The more confident we have become in our own powers, the less inclined we are to remember and give thanks to God. A materialistic society such as ours is not much given to thanksgiving; pride always silences the praise of God. Any true revival within the church will be marked by a new outburst of thanksgiving; a singing church is spiritually alive, for the praise of God bespeaks experience of his

saving power. When those around us have been brought out of darkness into the light, when they have been set free, when their lives finally have some meaning and hope, then they will lift their hearts in joy and praise.

So, the first aspect of the everyday Christian life in the here and now consists of praise and thanksgiving: every day, everywhere, no matter the situation. We each need to build times of praise into each part of every day. We must consider how we allow it to enter spontaneously into our lives. Most of us manage it occasionally but when we do, perhaps when we look at some special flower or plant in our garden or perhaps, when we see our children or grandchildren, we are thankful. But we need thankfilled lives, every minute of every day. To achieve this however, we need to have grown in our faith to the point where it provides the basic context in which we live and breath and have our being. Where it is present in all that we do. A great Christian once said: Like a fish swims in water we must live our lives in the presence of God. That is what we must show to this pride-filled, but jaded and disillusioned, world of ours! So, first is the joy of knowing and trusting God.

The second reading to be considered is the gospel reading. Here we see a much darker but no-the-less realistic vision of our lives. While Jesus is talking about the destruction of the second temple in AD70, the graphic description fits the reality of lives of his followers in all times. He says:

*You will be delivered up and some of you will be put to death, you will be hated for my name's sake. But not a hair of your head will perish. By your endurance you will gain your lives.*

This seems far removed from the joyous hope we have just been talking about. Certainly life does not always seem to be an arrangement with which even a human father could be well pleased: not when we reckon in sin and pain and all its

sorrows not to mention the chance mishaps of the world. Life truly has a dark side and this is felt in its full force by ordinary people everywhere who with courage simply shake their heads and never say a word. Heaven help us if we respond to such pain with superficialities. A trivial response is no answer to give to humanity for its woes.

For the Christian, the capacity to face the hard things of life and stare them down would be no more than what most of those in the world around us manage. What we have to offer is not stoic indifference to pain or a God who feels nothing or a faith that denies the reality of the pain, but a God who came and hurt and died alongside us. The pain was not avoided, the sense of being alone was real, life came by someone living through to the other side of it all. Jesus showed us that there was depth to life that went beyond the pain. It is a sad truth that the people who seem more real somehow are those who have lived with troubles; those who have come through them are deeper, more perceptive, more able to get along side others in trouble. A Moslem sage once put it '*the place where it does not rain is a desert*'. Though in different words, Jesus taught the same thing: *Blessed are those who mourn for they shall be comforted, blessed are the merciful for they will receive mercy, blessed are the peace makers..., blessed are those who are persecuted ...*, and so on. Just as there are laws that underlie the physical universe, like gravity, so there are principles that are just as real that rule the spiritual world. And just as you cannot defy the effects of gravity, you cannot defy the effects of the principles of the spiritual world. Freedom means we can choose wrongly. Our choices affect others regardless of their innocence. Living in the world transforms us for good or bad. These principles cannot be gainsaid. We cannot grow to the fullness of Christ without walking open eyed through the wilds of this world. But Jesus came, and Christ rose transformed, as will we. As he says in today's Gospel: '*you will be put to death, but not a hair of your head will perish. By your endurance you will gain your lives*'. The world obeys spiritual laws just as it does physical ones, we can learn to live skilfully in concert with them – or ignore them at our peril. One of the tasks of the Christian life is to learn to live

skilfully and we each need to ask ourselves if we are following a suitable training program.

So, while the first aspect of the Christian way is the joy of knowing and trusting God, the second is found in the transforming effect of our faith on the often harsh realities of life in this world.

The third aspect of the Christian life is found in the Old Testament reading, also from Isaiah but chapter 65 and also in the form of a psalm:

*'For behold, I create a new heaven and a new earth;*

*Be glad and rejoice for ever in that which I create; for behold, I create Jerusalem a rejoicing and her people a joy.*

*I will rejoice in Jerusalem and be glad in my people.*

*No more shall be heard in it the sound of weeping and the cry of distress.'*

The black reality of parts of our lives, is not the last word. This is the good news, Christ is risen. As we learn to live in concert with the spiritual truths that underlie human existence we can be transformed. As Paul puts it:

*For creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God; for the creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God. We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labour pains until now; and not only the creation but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies. For in hope we were saved.*

And this is the third aspect of the Christian life, hope. It is hope that we have to offer to our jaded world. With the disciples on the Sunday morning we can say 'he

is risen', we can say with Christians in every time and place 'he is risen', as we face life in present world we can say, 'he is risen'. As we share with those around us we can say 'he is risen'. As we live, each of us must show to those around us, 'he is risen'. Do we remember this each day? I know I do not. I need my brothers and sisters in Christ to remind me. How can we better help each other to remember that to which we have been called? How can we show this to those around us?

In summary then, while the first aspect of the Christian way is the joy of knowing and trusting God and the second is found in the transforming effect of our faith. The third is built on the hope of the resurrection. The world is not just a fruitless, pointless mess.

The fourth aspect of the Christian life that I will touch on is found in the Epistle, where Paul is writing to a young church and he is talking about the hard grind of living the day-to-day Christian life.

This is part of that transforming work, that learning to live skilfully, that we must undertake each day of our lives. God does not make us into puppets to be what we should, he calls us to the adult work of growing to the fullness of the stature of Christ aided his Spirit and under his firm hand. This means living the full human life so that we are transformed and, so show in our living, the truth of our faith to those around us. We will be stretched and trained, we will become skilled artisans in the art of true living.

In the text however Paul goes even further:

*You yourselves know how you ought to imitate us: we were not idle when we were with you we did not eat anyone's bread without paying, but with toil and labour we worked night and day to give you in our conduct an example to imitate.*

Christianity is finally dependent, for its influence on, and growth in the world, upon the character of its disciples. The most real instruction in the Christian way is always the Christian. Paul knew that a few notorious lazybones in the congregation of Thessalonica would undo by their example much of his teaching. The example of a life well lived is the example the world is crying out for. A radiant life of Christian service can never be argued away. There it stands and who can deny it? Each of us in our actual circumstances needs to ask, how does my way of living reflect on my Christian life to those who know me?

So the spiritual world works to a set of principles just as the material world obeys the laws of physics. Remember these are not simplistic rules; they are principles to be applied with fear and trembling by each of us to the living and transforming of our lives in the different contexts in which we find ourselves. We are called to understand these principles and in the joy of our faith, in the pain of our lives and in the hope of the resurrection, to witness by our living to whom we are and what we stand for. In the early church our faith was not called Christianity; it was called 'The Way'. Read the Gospels, try Luke for example, and you will find more about the principles we need to understand when living the Way.