

Sermon for Sunday 12th September - Stephen King

Read Gospel Mark 8.27-38

Intro.... May I speak in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.....

Eckart and the Worship Team are very persuasive – wanting to have different voices giving sermons during the interregnum and on the back of Amanda’s lovely sermon 2 weeks ago and Margaret’s last week he wondered if I would be encouraged to give today’s sermon – with the simple brief of saying something relevant about the Gospel, link it if possible to the other two readings and say something relevant to today’s world. I agreed but made the mistake of not reading the readings first – I was hoping for a nice easy Gospel like the Beatitudes, the Good Samaritan or the feeding of the 5000 so I could make nice topical links with Afghanistan, Refugees and the Climate Crisis.....

But today’s readings are quite challenging and took me a little out of my comfort zone... particularly Mark’s Gospel about the encounter between Jesus and a group of his disciples with His question ‘Who do people think that I am?’ The disciples answered ‘John the Baptist, Elijah or one of the prophets’ – these were some of popular Jewish speculation that these prophets may be the Messiah promised in Isaiah.... But he then asked ‘But who do YOU think that I am?’ to which Peter answered ‘You are the Messiah, the Christ’

... this, I assumed was the right answer but then, rather surprisingly Jesus ‘sternly ordered them not to tell anyone about him and immediately began to tell them ‘quite openly’ that ‘the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, chief priests and the scribes, and be killed.... And after three days rise again.’ I took this to mean that from the historical perspective Jesus thought it would have been dangerous for the disciples to proclaim that Jesus is the Messiah since it would infuriate the Roman and Jewish officials.

This response must have been quite a shock and I have a lot of sympathy for Peter taking Jesus aside to rebuke him – it seemed to me perfectly acceptable for Peter to raise questions about the necessity of suffering and to see if there was another way. But Jesus’s response and his telling Peter to ‘Get behind me Satan...for you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things’ brings him, and us, up short. Sometimes there are things we may have to do but don’t want to that we have to grasp by the nettle. The context here is key though. That for Christians the grasping of the nettle and the losing of one’s life to save it... is not the end of the story because of the promise of resurrection ‘After three days he will rise again’.

My conclusion on this narrative is that Mark’s Gospel is all about deciding what kind of Messiah Jesus is – not just the Son of God the wonder miracle worker and teacher of the Beatitudes and what loving God and one’s neighbour is all about but as the Son of Man, Jesus is the suffering servant who knew that he was to suffer and die and that for all of us following Jesus will entail some suffering before reaching the Kingdom with His Resurrection being the sign of hope for all of us.... Here I could end and maybe fade out to the strains of Handel’s Messiah... ‘Man of sorrows acquainted with Grief...’! But I wanted to go beyond my brief a little and end on a more positive note.

Although I tried I couldn't immediately find any obvious connections between today's readings and the current affairs in the world today as was my brief... but I wanted to add a postscript by asking how Jesus might have reacted to what is going on in Afghanistan and the looming refugee crisis and what this might mean for us at St Peters. I think one answer is found in Ch 25 of St Matthew's Gospel about the Last Judgement... the story of dividing the sheep from the goats... and telling His faithful followers..

'Come, you whom my Father has blessed, take as your heritage the kingdom prepared for you since the foundation of the world ... for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, a prisoner and you visited me and I was a stranger and you made me welcome.' And when the disciples asked 'when did we see you hungry or thirsty or a prisoner or when did we see you a stranger and made you welcome - , Jesus answered ' In truth, I tell you in so far as you did this to one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did it to me...'

I thought it timely to remind you of this because as you know St Peters is involved in the De Beauvoir Welcomes Refugees group... looking at ways we as a community might support Afghan Refugees, in the way we did four years ago with the community sponsorship of a Syrian family and how we might help those Afghan refugees who will be coming to or near Hackney. Finding practical ways of supporting the needs of refugees regardless of their faith or cultural background is surely part of our Christian calling.

I would like to end by quoting a short poem by the 13th Century Sufi poet, Rumi which I thought reflected a Christian as well as a Muslim approach to meeting strangers and making them welcome.

The Guest House

This being human is a guest house
Every morning a new arrival
A joy, a depression, a meanness,
Some momentary awareness comes
As an unexpected visitor.
Welcome and entertain them all!
Even if they're a crowd of sorrows,
Who violently sweep your house
Empty of its furniture,
Still treat each guest honorably.
They may be clearing you out
For some new delight.

The dark thought, the shame, the malice,
Meet them at the door laughing,
And invite them in.
Be grateful for whoever comes,
Because each has been sent
As a guide from beyond.

Not knowing how to end a sermon I thought I would finish with a Celtic Blessing:

May the road rise to meet you
May the wind be always at your back
May the sun shine warm upon your face
May the rains fall soft upon your fields
And until we meet again, may God hold you in the hollow of his hand.

Amen