

Third Sunday after Trinity - 7th July 2019

Freedom and Thankfulness

When I am looking through the Sunday readings, I often look for a word or phrase that stands out. This week I didn't have far to look as in today's collect, I was struck by :

'Give us grace to dedicate our freedom to your service.....'

I had just heard an interview on the radio about Hong Kong in which the interviewee was arguing that there was no threat to the freedom of those who live there from China and that the 'two systems one nation policy' promised when Britain gave Hong Kong back to China was still honoured. However, as we have seen in the media over these past few weeks, there is considerable unrest and anxiety in Hong Kong that gradually freedoms are being eroded and the latest fear is that a law allowing extradition to China is now before the Hong Kong parliament, although in the face of mass protests, it has been delayed for the moment but not withdrawn.

We do often pay lip service to the fact that we are lucky in this country that we have democratic rights to live as we wish within in the law and that there is freedom of religion, but, do we really value this as much as we should or do we take it for granted. Sadly, we hear continually from our political parties about claims of anti – semitism on the one hand and Islamophobia on the other, - and, more widely, of racism and other hate crimes – so how 'free are we'?

We can of course make comparisons with other countries around the world where e.g in Pakistan blasphemy laws can lead to imprisonment and threats of death for Christians and think that in comparison, we have nothing to fear.

We visited the Ukraine only a few weeks ago. We saw the most beautiful Ukrainian Orthodox churches and heard the most wonderful singing. In Odessa, we visited in one city, a Roman Catholic cathedral, Ukrainian Orthodox churches, a synagogue and a mosque and Moslem community centre. It was very interesting and heartening to see this freedom of religion, but the Ukrainians were always mindful, and some fearful, that Russia was, as one guide put it, 'breathing down their necks'. They wanted to keep their country independent at all costs, but the lessons of history taught them to be mindful of what could happen.

‘Give us grace to dedicate our freedom to your service.’

So we have freedom, we can make a choice to use that freedom in God’s service and Jesus is looking for labourers to ‘bring in the harvest’. In St. Luke’s gospel, we are given instructions as to how we are to go about this, how we are to be sent out. It is appropriate to reflect on this now as it is the season of ordination within the Church, when the newly ordained priests and deacons are being ‘sent out’ to their new parishes. It is heartening to see many pages of photographs of the newly ordained in the Church Times this week from all over the country, but as we know, ministry is not only for the ordained and lay ministry is very important too.

Let us take a look at Jesus’ instructions.

We are told to go simply ‘as lambs in the midst of wolves’ carrying no bag, no purse, no sandals and not to be deterred from our mission by chatting to people casually on the way. It is a challenging task and we need always to pray for more to help and support. Living simply is also the key and accepting hospitality when it is given. If people don’t listen, then simply move on, leaving the judgments to God. In its vulnerability, this is an imitation of Jesus’ own ministry.

As Andrew Ritchie comments:

‘Jesus’ earthly ministry, His preaching of good news to the poor, His embrace of those most despised and marginalised in society and His healing of illness, both physical and of the mind, proclaimed His ultimate triumph over sin and death.’

Jesus reminds them that this simple and practical work is part of a bigger and more violent battle. Success means defeat for the power of evil. This comes across in quite dramatic language:

‘Lord in your name, even the demons submit to us.’

He said to them, ‘I watched Satan fall from heaven like a flash of lightning. See, I have given you authority to tread on snakes and scorpions, and over all the power of the enemy: and nothing will hurt you.’

Jesus knows that victory is assured in the end, but the disciples’ own success or failure should not take away their joy at belonging to God for ever – the joy of eternal life.

This of course has to be viewed in the context of the time and has to be ‘translated’ as it were into our current situation.

‘Going out’, being ‘sent out’ can take many forms.

As we are very aware, there are many ‘new communities’ in and around Crowthorne. Churches in our Deanery and as part of our own parish vision plan we are all seeking to address how we can welcome newcomers to our area. The idea of ‘cake bombing’, with which you may be familiar, certainly doesn’t mean we are going empty handed, but it is a way of welcoming and introducing ourselves as Churches Together in Crowthorne, with information about services and activities as well as offering a cake – along with prayer walks where new homes are being built.

As we know, there are many other ways of being part of the local community.

We held a very uplifting ‘Songs of Praise’ here last Sunday evening when 9 people associated with Crowthorne in various ways chose a favourite hymn, explaining the reasons for their choice and a few words about the organisation they represented. Afterwards, everyone was welcomed to refreshments and there was a real buzz of chatter as people got to know each other better or caught up with friends.

‘Going out’ is also one of the main reasons for our May Fair and the summer activities on the Morgan Rec. We have Messy Church to welcome a new congregation, our All Souls’ Remembrance service, Café Eucharists and other All Age services at different times in the year.

I could go on, but this isn’t meant to sound complacent and Paul warns us about pride. There is always more we can do. I suppose I am trying to show that we do have to interpret scripture rather than to react against a passage such as this as being too difficult or not relevant to our age and time, or to think it isn’t for me but for others.

This is where I turn to the letter from Paul for some reassurance.

Having said, what has become a truism, that we reap what we sow, he tells us to ‘bear ‘one another’s burdens’ because in this way, ‘we will fulfil the law of Christ’ but that we must carry our own load as well.

There is encouragement.

‘Let us not grow weary in doing what is right, for we will reap at harvest time if we do not give up.’

And, at the heart of the Christian message,

‘So then, whenever we have an opportunity, let us work for the good of all, and especially for those of the family of faith.’

Going back to my original text:

‘Give us grace to dedicate our freedom to your service’

Let us not forget the freedom that our democracy brings us and in these turbulent times when tolerance and respect sometimes seem to be in short supply, we pray that we value it all the more and act out Jesus’ commandment to

‘ Love God and to love our neighbour as ourselves.’ - as we seek to minister to the wider community.

This morning we welcome Jasper and Louisa, and their families, to join our Church community here at St.John’s. By their baptisms they will also take the first step in becoming members of Christ’s world wide church.

You are very welcome.

Amen

Gillian Gyenes LLM