

Sermon 23 August 2020

Matthew 16:13:20 and Romans 12:1-8

Transformation? Change? Compromise?

This week I eventually watched the film *The Two Popes*. It tells of an imaginary meeting between Pope Benedict and his successor Pope Francis. Two very different men. One an academic, the other a man of the people. One who wanted truth never to change – for to change is to compromise. The other saw truth as eternal, yet needing to be expressed and understood in its current place and time. He said he had changed but had not compromised. Each knew guilt. Each needed the blessing of allowing themselves to be forgiven. To know and experience God's mercy.

Two very different people, different in their approach to life, in their gifts, their callings. And perhaps too in their approach to prayer.

I laughed out loud as Pope Benedict, asked to bless a takeaway pizza they were about to eat, started a long involved Latin grace. Each time he drew breath, the other reached for a slice of pizza, but had to withdraw as the Pope continued. Eventually the Pope asked the other if he had anything to add, and was met with a simple, heartfelt and no doubt, hungry, 'Amen'.

I watched the film with a friend who is more a fervent/wordy 'pray-er' than I am. It made us both laugh. I would have been the one with my hand hovering over the pizza! And indeed my friend and I are very different, in our approach to life, in our gifts, our callings, our fears and our hopes. And we interpret the truth/the faith we share in similar but different ways.

We don't seem to be reading the epistle at the moment. If you have a spare moment, I commend it to you. Romans 12:1-8. In it Paul appeals to us:

To present our bodies as living sacrifices, and

To be transformed by the renewing of our minds and not conform to the world

So that:

We are holy and acceptable to God, and

Able to discern the will of God.

We use the phrase, 'to be a living sacrifice' in one of the post communion prayers. When I was growing up in South Wales, the Church in Wales used a slightly different phrase: 'to be a lively sacrifice' rather than a living sacrifice. It somehow conjures up

someone involved in the process of self offering. A process that is about becoming alive with new life that bursts out in unexpected ways. I love that phrase and tend to substitute in my mind, a lively sacrifice, as I join in the prayer. Does that make me resistant to change?

And being transformed by the renewing of our minds to be able to discern the will of God, suggests to me that Paul expected that God's will might change over time, might change quite regularly for us as individuals, as well as a church, in order that we might help to meet the needs of the world around us, to be God's voice and hands in the world. Because of course the world doesn't really change that much – injustice, poverty, inhumanity, fear, abuse of power, greed, compassion, friendship, love, listening – all can be seen throughout both the Old and New Testaments. Have been present through the sweep of history and are with us today.

Paul goes on to draw attention to us as a gathered group of people. Each with different gifts and callings. Gifts of prophesy, of ministry, of teaching, of giving, of encouragement, of leading, of being compassionate and of being cheerful. God, by His grace, gives us each different gifts. Paul asks us to use them well. Even the smallest acts – every thoughtful gesture; every supportive word; every prophetic demonstration of justice; every meal cooked; every day of work; every shoelace tied for another; every tear wiped; is a glimpse of the power that Jesus had and promises.

Some of us may have found that we have gifts we didn't know we had before March 2020. Some may be mourning gifts that have perhaps been laid dormant, laid aside for this strange season. Some may be rejoicing that the gifts they already had, have been able to be exercised in new ways. Being open to God's renewing of our minds, to put aside pride, arrogance and ego, and enjoy what might come from God, through that renewing, can be frightening, can be exciting, but it won't leave us in the doldrums.

This process of transformation and renewal is not a one off, it continues to change us.

I said at the beginning that the imagined conversation between the two popes suggested that they each needed to receive God's blessing of forgiveness, to know and experience God's mercy.

How human, and how like Peter. Peter is everyman.

In Matthew's gospel reading today, Jesus says: 'You are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church'.

What was Peter's experience?

He had witnessed healings, starting in his own family.

He had twice tasted miraculous meals

He had heard sermons on justice and about reading the signs of the times

He had walked on water – answering the call to ‘come’ he had flourished and fallen.

He had, like the Canaanite woman from last week’s sermon, declared that Jesus is the Messiah.

What do we know of his character? – he is impetuous, willing to give things a go.

And we know that he denies knowing Jesus three times. And we know that Jesus subsequently mirrors that denial as he forgives him three times, while commanding him three times to ‘feed my sheep’, look after my people.

Peter goes on to be great in the leadership and growth of the early church. Full of the Holy Spirit he becomes a preacher, he resists change to include gentiles and then brokers a deal to enable that to happen. He shows that blessedness is not about perfection, it’s about willingness. To get up one more time than we fall.

Willingness. Being a lively sacrifice. Being willing to not conform to this world. Being willing to have our minds transformed.

Kandis challenged us last week to think about who might be the Canaanite woman we know? Who might we exclude unconsciously? That’s all part of being transformed.

Bishop Lee recently challenged me and a group of LLMs to start a conversation about what a favourite bible verse might be. I think it was meant to work that I would start the ball rolling by telling one person what my favourite verse is, and why. I think I was meant to tell it to someone who is not a regular worshipper. I thought I would start by trying it out with you. Usually I would have chosen from Phillipians 4, but that, for me has become rather overused during this current crisis. And so, for now, maybe not for ever, Romans 12: 1 and 2. By the mercy of God, present your body as a lively sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God – what is good, and acceptable and perfect’.

And I would like to point out that the word ‘perfect’ at the end of verse 2 is about the will of God, and not about me. I simply have to be willing to give it a go.

So I pass the challenge on. What is your favourite verse at the moment? Why? Does it bring comfort? does it bring challenge? Tell someone. Maybe you will be inspired to hear something new. Or something new in the familiar.

You can find Bishop Lee's at <https://ms-my.facebook.com/Diocese.of.Bristol/videos/sunday-5-july-2020-homily-by-the-bishop-of-swindon/292260055229833/>

And if you can't watch it and the reflection that goes with it, then his verse(s) are Matthew 11: 28-30. Which starts: 'Come to me, all you who are weary and carrying heavy burdens and I will give you rest....' You can look the rest up for yourselves.

Amen

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