

Sermon for the Third Sunday before Lent, 17th February
2019

*Jeremiah 17:5-10; 1 Corinthians 15:12-20; Luke 6:17-26 -
see <http://bible.oremus.org/?q|=417352294> : Add Faith*

I have to tell you that, when I read the Bible lessons for today, my sermon pretty much wrote itself. That's because today we are given a sort of potted guide to several key points in our Christian religion. It's a different angle on some of the most important things we say in the Creed. See if you agree.

Yesterday we had our Marriage Enrichment day, for everyone who is going to get married at St Mary's this year - I don't know whether it was Godfrey's cunning plan, to schedule it nearly on St Valentine's Day, or whether it just came out that way. Be that as it may, I had a sneak preview when I was helping to set up the lantern slides for it.

I was impressed by one slide which listed 'Six Topics' - actually with an exclamation mark, 'Six Topics!' in a marriage. They were Money, Time, Sex, Children, Communication and Difficult times/Conflict (which is really two topics, but never mind). But the interesting bit was that on the side of the picture, alongside the list of the six (or seven) topics, was, in big handwritten style, '+Faith', you know, the word 'Faith' in big swirly letters, with a plus sign in front of it. Add faith.

That's the point of lesson number one today, our Old Testament lesson. Add faith. 'Cursed are those who trust in mere mortals ... whose hearts turn away from the Lord.' But 'Blessed are those who trust in the Lord. ... They shall be like a tree planted by water ... in the year of drought it is not anxious, and it does not cease to bear fruit.' If people didn't get so bogged down in everyday life, if they didn't forget to think of God, perhaps to say their prayers a

bit, and to read their Bible, things would go better. God will be with them in the difficult times.

But what is the faith which you need to add, for a successful marriage - or, following the prophet Jeremiah, for a fruitful life?

You could just say to our wedding couples - and have we got anyone here this morning who went to the course yesterday? Or was it enough to be going on with? Anyway, you could just say to them, 'Pay attention to the words of the Creed. I believe ...' - I believe: in what? What do Christians believe in?

Incidentally, I think it's important not to get too stuck on saying 'I'. 'I believe'. It may be more honest to say, 'We believe. We.' There may be some less important things that we struggle with, but we can say the Creed all together, if we say 'we', and if we mean, 'This is what Christians as a body subscribe to - and I'm in that group.' It need not mean that, in order to belong to the church, you have to believe in every detail. You can just be happy to belong.

So back to the question, what do we believe, as Christians? What is our faith? Our other two lessons, from St Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians, and from St Luke chapter 6, will give us some more important pointers.

You'll note that, although we've just done our marriage enrichment course, the lesson from 1 Corinthians isn't the normal wedding one, 'Though I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, and have not charity, I am become a sounding brass, or a tinkling cymbal'. Oh, all right, '... if I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, and have not love'. It's 'love' in a wedding, not charity. But we're not doing that bit. We're looking at the fifteenth chapter, about the resurrection of the dead. That, that's a key point in Christian faith. Faith in the resurrection, in life after

death. Starting with Jesus himself, and then growing into what in the funeral service we call the ‘sure and certain hope’ of eternal life. We often have 1 Corinthians 15 at funerals. We have it because St Paul really goes into this key bit of faith, faith in eternal life, in a resurrection of the dead.

St Paul’s letter reads a bit like the transcript of one side of a telephone conversation. We can’t hear exactly what the Corinthians were saying: but it’s pretty clear that some of them were poo-pooing the possibility of life after death. St Paul points out the logical implications of that. If there is no chance of resurrection, then the whole basis of our faith, our belief that Jesus was raised from the dead, would be contradicted. So one of the key points in Christian faith is a belief in life after death - and in particular a belief that Jesus was the first one to be resurrected.

It’s such an extraordinary thing, so contrary to all the laws of nature, that it is difficult to believe. So St Paul goes on, after the passage which we have read today, to tackle the question not just that the dead are raised, but how they are raised. It can be your homework today. Read the rest of chapter 15 of 1 Corinthians. Even if you are a Darwinist, there’s nothing in it to upset your scientific understanding. I won’t spoil it.

So in our first two lessons we see two pillars of our Christian faith, that you need faith, if your life is going to be fruitful - that you shouldn’t try to ignore the Divine - and that our Christian faith is centred on Jesus’ resurrection from the dead. It is a sign, a vital sign. We believe that the empty tomb was real. And then, we believe in what Jesus’ death and resurrection meant, in who Jesus really was, and in what he did. That Jesus is God, God with us. But note that as St Paul says, if that really is too much to stomach, then you need to know what it is you are dismissing. You can’t have Jesus without His resurrection. Without it, he’s not God.

And then in St Luke's Gospel we go on to hear what the effect of Jesus, the effect of His coming, is, and what it still can be. Our lesson is St Luke's version of the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus' great statement of what you must do, if you really follow His teaching. First of all he states how contrarian, how back-to-front, Christianity is. Basically in those days, just as it is today, people tended to equate material success and prosperity with virtue. You couldn't live in such a lovely house; you couldn't really have such a nice car, unless you were basically doing the right thing, unless you were a good person. Scruffy people must really be pretty useless, you're tempted to think. No wonder they're living in damp rented flats if they only bothered to get one GCSE - in some non-subject or other. Feckless.

But Jesus says that if you're poor, or hungry, or sad, it's not a question of blame. There's no such thing as the deserving - or undeserving - poor. They are 'Μακάριοι' in the Greek, blessed. That's what the poor are, what the hungry are. Jesus turns things upside-down. This passage of 'beatitudes', blessings, 'Blessed are the .. [whoever it is]', runs into the really revolutionary bit, 'Love your enemies, turn the other cheek, lend without expecting to be repaid.' Don't rush to judge someone - it could be you next. All those great, generous ideas - but the problem is that no-one really follows them. Because people say that just as resurrection can't be real, in real life turning the other cheek is a lovely idea in theory, but it can't be practical.

But what Jesus is advocating is a bit like what St Paul was saying about resurrection, about life after death. If you've got no faith in it, you've thrown the baby out with the bathwater. If you make faithful-sounding noises, if you tell everyone you've been saved, but you still think that rich people must somehow be better people, and poor people must really be a bit useless, a bit feckless - if being saved doesn't make any difference to what you do, to how

you treat people, then Jesus is there to tell you you're just not getting it yet.

This is a neat way for me to round off what I'm saying. Godfrey and I are going to be running a Lent Bible study course, and the theme is going to be exactly what our Gospel today was about - the Beatitudes. I do hope you will come. We'll have a session in the daytime and a session in the evening. I hope you will feel blessed at the end of it - and that you will see that being blessed isn't the same as being comfortably off. You will need to add faith.

Amen.

Hugh Bryant