

Sermon for Evensong on the Fourth Sunday after Easter,
19th May 2019

Daniel 6:1-23, Mark 15:46-16:8 - see

<http://bible.oremus.org/?ql=425198925> - *Lion Prayers*

This week at the Parochial Church Council meeting, among other important things the Council was kind enough to pass a resolution to confirm that St Mary's would like to have me continue to be licensed as your Reader, your Licensed Lay Minister, as they like to call it, and for me to be granted a new licence for five years for that purpose. So thank you to everyone for your confidence in me in asking that indeed I should be inflicted on you for another five years.

It occurs to me that I perhaps ought to tell you a little bit about how I go around being your Reader, your Licensed Lay Minister. I won't bore you with all the gory details of the training and how I felt the call to ministry and so on, because to some extent that is a matter of history. I'm here and I'm doing the job. It's more a question of trying to answer, for example, a question that quite often crops up as we shake hands at the door at the end of the service, and that is, how do you choose or decide what to talk about?

Does the sermon come from a tortured wrestling with the thoughts of Chairman Jeremy into an echo of St Paul's letters? I know some of you think that that is the case! For others my politics are not sufficiently in line with Acts chapter 2 for example [Acts 2:44-45], or the story of the rich young ruler [Matthew 19:16-30, Mark 10:17-31 and Luke 18:18-30], although looking at me you will immediately realise that I am not young or a ruler. Whether I am rich or not depends on your point of view. Seen from behind the fire station in Cobham I am rich. Seen from a palace on the Crown Estate I am the oily rag.

But the answer that I give, and I will give it to you now, is that in preaching my first duty is to explain the Scriptures to you, to try to clarify the points in the Bible readings which we have from day to day which may not be clear or which may be controversial in one way or another, and then to try to relate this word of God, so-called, to our modern day lives. Perhaps another way of expressing that is to say that, if the church - this church, and also the church throughout the world - if the church is the body of Christ, is Christ's presence on Earth, then as a preacher I have a prophetic role in it. Jesus's body is you in front of me. You are the saints. But what would Jesus do? What would Jesus say? In interpreting holy scripture and relating it to our world, the preacher's job is often to answer those questions. What would Jesus do?

So I expect that one or two of you are idly surfing through Oremus Bible Browser on your iPad, or even checking the family Bible which is in your handbag and looking again at our Bible stories today. Daniel and the lion, and the last bit of St Mark's Gospel. Wow! You might say. How are you going to preach on those?

Some of you will remember that the story of Daniel and the lion infallibly reminds me, and I of course I have to remind you, of the wonderful story of a lion, called Christian – what a wonderful name. There was a wonderful documentary film about him which you can still see on YouTube. I will put the link on the church website with this sermon.

[\[https://youtu.be/EZ-da0AZcRU\]](https://youtu.be/EZ-da0AZcRU)

The story is about two young men about town in the Chelsea of the 1960s, the swinging 60s, who went to Harrods when Harrods had a pet department, and when,

amazingly, they had a lion cub for sale. This lion cub was called Christian. They took him home to Cheyne Walk where they lived, and he thrived in their basement. They took him out on a lead for a walk down the King's Road on a Saturday morning, as you do, and he became part of the life of Chelsea. Unfortunately of course, as they do, Christian the lion cub grew and became rather unmanageable. He didn't actually bite anybody, but there were one or two near misses, which suggested that it was getting a bit risky for him to continue as a lion-about-town in Chelsea.

So, with the help of Joy Adamson, of 'Born Free' fame, The boys took Christian to Africa and he was progressively introduced into the wild. He was eventually released into the wild by Joy Adamson. The film is also about the boys going back to Africa a dozen years later, to the place where they remember Christian was let loose in the bush. Amazingly, a lion burst out of the bushes and greeted them, putting his paws around their necks, licking them and purring in a very leonine way. It was Christian! Somewhat surprisingly they were not fazed by this and simply kept the camera rolling. It is a very affecting little film.

The lesson about Daniel is that he couldn't rely on the lion in the den being one of Christian's friendly ancestors. You will remember John Aspinall the casino owner and zookeeper who was a great lover of big cats, several of whose keepers unfortunately met an untimely end, being eaten by lions or tigers. That was surely the outcome that Daniel was really facing. So it was a miracle, and we are supposed to draw the conclusion that, because Daniel believed in God and prayed to him, God kept faith with him and put friendly thoughts in the mind of the lion, so that he didn't eat Daniel. It begs the question what we really think the mechanism, if I can put it that way, the mechanism of prayer, is in reality.

How do prayers work? Do we, or should we, expect to be able to make prayers to God asking for improbable things and then being delighted if our prayers are in some sense answered? Some people indeed only pray when they are praying for improbable things, when everything else has failed. Then the only thing left is prayer, they say.

I've got a feeling that God doesn't work that way, but the truth is that we can't know precisely how God works or if indeed he does 'work' in that sense. There are philosophical difficulties about a world which is controlled by God using some kind of cosmic radio control. How would we be able to understand evil, if God controlled everything? It would suggest that he was the author of evil as well as good. The traditional answer to this is Thomas Aquinas' answer that there is free will, that human beings were given free will as well as all the other blessings. (See <http://www.newadvent.org/summa/1083.htm#article1>) Therefore we have the freedom to choose between the good and the bad. We can choose the bad.

So can we pray to our heavenly father about whatever it is in our life which is like what the lion was to Daniel? Can we ask for miracles? I suspect not. I suspect that, as we say in the Lord's prayer, we should be praying, "Thy will be done", and understanding that 'Thy will' is a will for whatever is best, whatever is good. So we pray that whatever is good and whatever is best will be done, will be the will of God. We can pray that the lion in the den will turn out to be our friend Christian.

And then we turn to the end of Saint Mark's Gospel. I'll leave you with a bit of research for the week. If you turn up different bibles, you will find that actually St Mark's Gospel has three different endings. Perhaps to be more precise it

has three different lengths of ending. The shortest is the one that we had read tonight. It ends up with the words, “.. for they were afraid”. It does sound a bit as though it ends in the middle of a sentence. The way the Greek runs, it has, “.. they were afraid, for ..”, or “they were afraid, because ...” [εφοβουντο γαρ]

Whichever way you look at it, these words don't sound like the end of the story. So in some Bibles there are two alternative extra bits of ending which add more of the resurrection story of Jesus. The meeting with the disciples on the road to Emmaus; greeting the apostles over a meal; effectively the Doubting Thomas story, and so on. All the same bits that you find in the other gospels. But they weren't necessarily there. Most scholars say that the additional longer bits of Saint Mark's Gospel were added later and are not in the earliest manuscripts, so to some extent there is a lesson to be drawn or to be discussed, not about what is in the gospel but what is not in the gospel, and why not.

I've gone on long enough. The other thing which a good preacher has to do is not to put his congregation to sleep. So I am going to let you think again a bit more by yourselves about the ending of St Mark's Gospel and why there isn't the full story there. Perhaps we can talk about it on another occasion. In the meantime let us continue to say our prayers, to speak to God, but perhaps to ponder how Daniel must have said his prayers, in the den of lions.

Amen.

Hugh Bryant