

First Sunday of Trinity – Talk 140620

‘For while we were still weak Christ died for the ungodly’; that’s us. This is not an invitation to feel how bad we are but a statement about how astonishingly and unfailing generous God is. Whilst we continue trying to do our best, but often missing the mark, God continues to love us and strengthen us. In this lies our hope.

In these days when lockdown is being eased and yet we are still urged to stay at home as much as possible we are bound to feel unsure and long for the time when we can be unrestrained and make our own plans. As if all the heartbreak and suffering of the coronavirus was not enough we now face dire economic predictions and we have seen an outpouring of pain and misery from BAME communities across the globe after the brutal murder of George Floyd.

It is as if the Coronavirus crisis has pushed into sharp focus many inequalities and injustices in our societies. Many people are wondering and hoping that we can learn from this time and take the good things that have occurred in to a better future. Can we continue to be better neighbours, closer communities? Can we keep pollution levels down so that we are able to less reliant on fossil fuels and have a chance to reach our carbon reduction goals?

In the hymn we have just heard (and maybe I hope sung along with?!) we were asked, ‘Will you kiss the leper clean?’ Perhaps you know that this refers to an event in the life of St Francis of Assisi. God’s word to Francis was ‘Take the bitter for the sweet.’ Francis was a very fastidious young man and felt disgusted at the sight of those poor unfortunate souls suffering the incurable disease of leprosy. The very sound of the leper’s bell, to warn people to stay clear as the leper approached, made Francis feel sick. Yet Francis recognised that to truly love all people, unreservedly he must love even those he instinctively rejected. So Francis embraced a leper and always afterwards cared for them. He voluntarily found sweetness in what was bitter and hateful.

To take the bitter for the sweet is a way of acting out of God’s values, even if this is challenging to us. As we face a future that will be difficult for everyone we need to take the bitter for the sweet. We need to act out of the values of the kingdom to go out into the world to bring good news to the poor, release to those bound, sight to those who cannot see and freedom for those who are oppressed. Perhaps this seems an impossible task and so many people will argue that it cannot be done and maybe we would also like to put it off until we have got back to normal and then we can give it our best effort. But if we take the bitter for the sweet we will step out into the unknown in faith.

The gospel is full of advice like this: lose your life in order to save it; set out on a journey with no provisions. So choose the bitter, God says to Francis, choose freely what must be. If we wait until we feel like it we miss the opportunities for transformation and renewal.

If, for instance, we keep saying well of course all lives matter, we fail to face the leper, the horrific Spector of racism, we miss the moment to say black lives matter and confront this bitter reality.

Jesus words to his disciples as he sent them out to proclaim the good news were not entirely comforting – see, he says, I send you out like sheep into the midst of wolves and, he warns, you will meet violent opposition. Yet the disciples set out and so can we because we know that in our weakness God is with us, and through the power of the Spirit we can inhabit the values of the kingdom.