

SERMON FOR St GEORGE'S EASTERGATE; MAY 10TH 2020.

Today's readings are not easy to talk about. We are in difficult times, not totally unlike the times we have just been reading about. We do not want, do we, to find out how we would cope with watching someone being stoned to death for believing in Jesus...any more than we want to know how we would cope with watching someone breathing their last after a heroic struggle to stay alive...a doctor perhaps who has volunteered after retiring to come back and use his expertise to try and save the lives of fellow men and women who have caught COVID 19. We are very tempted aren't we to say why is God allowing this to happen? What sense does the resurrection make in the light of what we are all witnessing at the moment?

The writer of Luke's Gospel casts Stephen's death in the mould of Jesus' death...he wants us to understand that Stephen, the first Christian martyr, followed his Lord to death not only in his commitment but also in his conduct. Both men faced accusations by the people at the instigation of religious leaders, both had the assurance that they were leaving this world to be with their God, and both prayed for forgiveness for those causing their deaths. The ways of God are often very hard to understand at the time but here we see that Stephen accepted what was happening to him just as Jesus had before him. The Holy Spirit enabled him to be aware of the bigger picture where God was still in control and into whose presence he would soon be admitted.

If we turn to our Gospel reading for today, in contrast to this vivid and bloodthirsty story which led to persecution and the scattering of the church to a much wider world, we have the

measured calm of the conversation between Jesus and his disciples. He starts with the reassuring words “Do not let your hearts be troubled...” ..we are in much calmer waters. But let us not forget the context of these words. They are uttered in the context of the Last Supper. Jesus had just demonstrated his humility as their leader and his love for them by washing their feet. He then went on to predict his own suffering and death..his betrayal and Peter’s denial. It was in the middle of all that, when they must have been themselves in shock and disbelief that God would allow this to happen that he says...

Do not be afraid...Believe in God , believe also in me.

I am going ahead of you to my Father’s house where I will prepare a place for you too.

And when Thomas protests that they don’t know the way, he says clearly...in effect..you don’t need to know the way ...all you need to know is me and I am the way for you. What wonderful words for them as they were facing their dearest friend’s death. What many of us are facing right now. We are to hang on to the relationship we have with Jesus...that will last and see us through whatever!!

Remember what I said earlier about the difficulty of seeing God in our present circumstances...many many of us may well be saying “Where on earth is God in all this?” what Jesus says here, in this conversation just before his own death, is that to see and know Him is to be actually seeing God at work. In the life of Jesus we saw God at work; when we see his example of self sacrificial love being acted out by so many in this present crisis...THAT is God at work in our world!! THAT is God recreating humanity to what He intended it to be.

This is not the first time in history that this sort of scenario has been seen. In the 1660s our country endured a terrible plague as did the whole of Europe. At the time we are told the government of the day ordered public prayers of confession and to implore the mercy of God to avert his terrible judgement. Today we are uncomfortable with a language of plagues as divine judgement. The idea that God creates a virus with the considered aim of killing tens of thousands sounds more like the pagan gods of Greece and Rome; not the God of Jesus Christ, a God of love. But I have a thought here for us to consider in this difficult time. The Greek word commonly translated in the Bible by our word “judgement” is KRISIS...from which we get our word crisis; and by this we mean a significant moment which draws together strands of existence which creates a sense of emergency; in other words something which brings things to a head. They may well be times when things significant are revealed about society and people. Another such time which has been on all our minds over this last week of course was the times of the 2 world wars. The times we are in tell us a lot about the society we live in and about ourselves don't they!

One of the most important things these times show us I would suggest is that human beings are not at the moment in control... and we are being forced to look hard at the facts about the environment, about the differences between the lives of rich and poor people for a start.

Now if we humans are not in control...who is? Our readings this morning spell out for us clearly that it is God our creator who is in control, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. Despite appearances He always has been and He always will be. Each Sunday morning, the day of resurrection, we remember what He did for us in the sacrificial love of Jesus. That we shall share together in, even

though we are socially distant from each other, as we remember that last supper and Jesus' words which make clear what was really going on.

AMEN.