

JUNE 28TH..SERMON AT ST GEORGE'S EASTERGATE:

During this long summer season of Trinity our liturgical colours, as we all know, are green, the colour of growth. This has been more apparent than ever before to us this year has it not! In terms of the spiritual lessons for us during this time we are encouraged to explore ideas that help us in our walk with God; to develop our inner spiritual resources and the part of our person that is not just mortal and passing but that is spiritual and will last for ever. A Christian friend of mine often says to people that he thinks of our life here and now as a preparation for the life to come...the really real...what we are made for. This is not always easy to grasp but that is why it is important to think about our spiritual development when we meet together for worship and reads passages from God's word together.

So what of our readings today? What messages do they have for us on our Christian journey?

Well interestingly enough the message St Paul gave to the early Christians to help them on their journey; to explain to them how God was working in their lives; came right out of the culture of the day not surprisingly. At the very heart of that culture was the system of human slavery. Well what a thing! What could be more topical for the culture we are now living in?

The world in which these early Christians were trying to work out how to follow Jesus was a world in which if you were rich and powerful you owned men women and children who did all your work for you; and they were totally bound to you for their whole lives; and of course in the time of Jesus everyone in the growing Roman empire was bound into loyal service to the emperor; no one was their own boss. Alongside this the Jewish people had, over many generations, been brought up to believe that Almighty God, the creator of the world was the one all human beings owed allegiance to. To give allegiance to a mortal ruler went against all they believed as the people of God. When Jesus appeared on the scene in Israel there was something spiritually liberating about him many thought. He loved, he healed, he taught about God in a new way which spoke to their hearts. BUT in the end he was crucified because he was seen as a threat to the authority of the emperor. Of course we now know that this was not the end of the story. Those closest to him experienced being with him again over a period of a few weeks and realised that there was a life beyond death. St Paul, formerly Saul a Pharisee who fiercely persecuted the followers of Jesus who were spreading this good news, was stopped in his tracks by Jesus who appeared personally to him. From that point onwards he devoted all his energy into spreading the good news of the gospel throughout the then known world.

That has been I'm afraid a rather long background explanation to his main message for us today. In our own culture, at this very moment, we are looking back in history to what we see as an evil institution; human slavery. There is a lot of anger about what happened in the past, and rightly so; many many human lives and families were wrecked over in the interest of material wealth and dominance. There is a lot of collective guilt in the anger we are seeing today on our streets.

It is the idea of humans being enslaved that Paul is reflecting on in our Epistle as he tries to help Christians to understand what is going on in their lives spiritually. Look back at some of the words from our Collect for today..."give us grace to dedicate our freedom to your service that we and all creation may be brought to the glorious liberty of the children of God." We prayed at the beginning of our service.

In the first century the analogy of the slave market that St Paul used, a slave was bound to obey his or her master, but there was a point beyond which the master no longer had any authority over them, and that was death. Paul made it clear in his letters to the early Christian churches that their spiritual lives could be seen in this way. "Once" he said " you were slaves of sin. Sin was your master and you were bound to do all the evil things that sin ordered you to do. You had no power to say no. But now you have

died to this old way of life; so you need no longer pay attention to sins demands; in fact you have passed from the service of sin into the service of God. Furthermore there is a huge difference between the two masters. The wages that sin pays you lead ultimately to death whereas God GIVES to you freely and generously far more than you deserve and what He gives to you leads ultimately to eternal life.

Now what are we in 2020 to make of this argument? Is it just a kind of fiction thought up by a rather crazed first century Pharisee? Is it just an exhortation to pull ourselves together and make a new start? To do better in the future by the effort of will and the imagination? NO it is not I would suggest. It is an attempt to put into words something that has proved a reality in the lives of many many Christians down through the centuries; and it is something that is passed down to us today through God's word. We shall celebrate this at the end of our service today in the wonderful hymn by Charles Wesley at the beginning of the 18th century..."my chains fell off, my heart was free; I rose went forth and followed thee." The Christ we worship is the Christ who through his death and resurrection has "broken the power of cancelled sin" is another way Christians have put it down through the ages.

When thinking about how this can be relevant to our lives here and now, most of us have not had the experience of being enslaved to another human being I am glad to say;

but all of us do have the experience of what it means to be enslaved to our mortal nature, and sometimes that can be bad...we don't call it slavery we call it addiction. Ask an alcoholic what it feels like when they finally break free of their addiction and that should go some way to explaining the exhilarating freedom the Christian experiences when they commit to Christ...the freedom experience we shall sing together about later. It is this imagery that lies behind the ceremony of Baptism...we die to our old life,are washed clean , and rise up to a new life in Christ.

Now the realisation of that may happen suddenly for some of us or gradually but what St Paul offers us in using this imagery in our reading today is an understanding of what it means to have an experience of God in our lives today, and the sheer wonder of it.

What we celebrate together today is that we Christians are not any longer addicted to our human failings but that God gives us the ability, which we do not deserve in any way at all, to live the life of Jesus in our daily lives and by doing so proclaim this glorious message to a world that so badly needs it.

AMEN.