

Sermon 10 October 2021

Sometimes we ask questions, seeking understanding and insight, but we ask not expecting, or wanting, the answer to inconvenience us – to challenge and change us.

Our reading from Hebrews today, tells us “the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing until it divides soul from spirit, joints from marrow; it is able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart.” (v12) It is the life and power of God that works in our lives and influences our lives. (Or it should.) Sometimes we want the life and power of God in our lives, but we don’t always like or appreciate the effect God’s word has on our lives. We sometimes have a false sense that following Jesus, that being blessed by God means that our lives should be plain sailing. That if we just don’t do anything wrong or bad, then we are ok. And sometimes when things do go wrong, then like Job, we ask where God is and like the Psalmist, we want to know why God allows certain things to happen? In times like these we have a longing for God to change our present circumstances. We have a desperate need for God to answer our questions and enable us to feel God's presence.

Yet nowhere in the word of God are we promised a life of ease. In fact, it is just the opposite. The life and path of discipleship – of love – is not an easy one. And this is something we all struggle with. To the point that some of us walk away from it at different times of our lives and yes, we may come back, while others of us walk away completely – like the rich man we encounter in the gospel reading today.

Today God’s word reminds us again of the cost of discipleship. It reminds us that if the word of God does not disturb, does not disrupt, does not question our habits and does not transform us – as communities, churches, families and individuals – then it is unlikely to be the word of God. Today’s readings are difficult – challenging. They give us an opportunity to once again wrestle with God’s word as we seek to follow Jesus and live kingdom values.

The gospel text today tells the familiar story – perhaps too familiar - of a rich man who comes to Jesus and asks, “Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?”

And Jesus says, “You know the commandments” and he lists all the ones that have to do with our relationships with other people. In other words, Jesus is saying, you know what to do – live according to God’s word – treat others with compassion, love, and respect. And the man responds by saying he has kept the commandments - obeyed the word of God – since his youth. Following on from this we are told that, “Jesus, looking at him, loved him and said, “You lack one thing; go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me.”” It is important to note that Jesus responds to the man from a place of love. But when the man hears Jesus’ answer he is “shocked” and goes “away grieving, for he had many possessions.” (10: 21-22) And so we see that Jesus’ answer challenges this man in a way he did not expect – he is “shocked” and goes “away grieving. Jesus did not tell the man to go, sell his possessions, give the money to the poor and come follow him because he wanted him to be poor. Jesus is not calling this man to a life of poverty but rather to a life of discipleship. A call made because Jesus loves him and wants him to enjoy God’s gift of love and grace – of eternal life. Jesus could see that this man’s possessions were his treasure and Jesus tells him to sell it and give the money to the poor so that he can be free to respond to God’s gift of love and grace that is the true treasure. These are words that speak of hope and salvation. Of new life, that is only possible when the old life is let go of. We cannot live both an old and new life at the same time. One of them has to go.

We live in a world that encourages the acquisition of possessions and wealth. We spend so much time chasing after more and better and bigger. When we get even a little bit more, we spend our time protecting it at all cost. Focusing our attention on our possessions – clinging to them - makes it difficult for us to enter the kingdom of God. It takes our focus away from God – coming between us and God. Blinding us to kingdom values and making us deaf to the cries of the poor.

Yes, we keep the commandments. We may not have caused harm to others. But the question is, have we engaged – wrestled – with the commandments in a way that makes a difference to our lives and to the lives of other people? Have we like Jesus reinterpreted the commandments in a way that brings them to life and points to love? Or are they merely commands to be obeyed or boxes to be ticked? I have to wonder

if, like the rich man in the gospel reading today, we too miss point of what lies behind the commandments – love, care, compassion and grace for one another. Jesus tells us, in other biblical passages, that all these commandments can be summed up in the two that say, Love the Lord your God with all your heart and soul and mind. And love your neighbour as yourself. I wonder if we miss the point that following Jesus is not an alternative to the commandments, but rather that he is way to understanding them and bringing them to life in the way we live. I wonder if we miss the point that following Jesus gives us an opportunity to live new and different lives.

The call to discipleship is a call to live kingdom values rather than worldly values. It is a call to a life of simplicity, unencumbered by the things that can so often draw us away from the love of God. It means that if we are to take this call seriously we need to listen to, and wrestle with, God's word and have the courage to allow it to disrupt and transform the choices we make. Because the choices we make every day are based on what we treasure.

Each day is a new day. Filled with possibilities. Filled with hope, grace and new life. Will we embrace it? Or will we too go away grieving? My prayer is that we may have the courage to let go of our old lives – our old ways – and accept Jesus' invitation to follow him anew every day.

Amen