

Homily Trinity 11 - 23 August 2020: Romans 12.1-8 & Matthew 16.13-20

'I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship.'

The person in whose memory my theological college was founded, Brooke Foss Westcott (sometime Bishop of Durham and Cambridge divine) took this text from today's first reading as the one for his first sermon and thereafter claimed that it contained all he ever preached! No pressure, then! Though perhaps Westcott strayed a little past the first verse as I will today...

It's a stirring vision, especially if we think of a newly-ordained minister, of the Cambridge atmosphere, of today's young people at the crowning of their education or on the cusp of vocations and careers: present yourselves as a living sacrifice; offer yourselves, the whole of yourselves, your whole life in a worthy cause, for the transformation of self and other and world.

But the young today are still suspended in the air with the GCSE, A Level and B-TEC debacle and they and all of us are stepping out into this pandemic world with threats not only to health, but to the economy and livelihoods, to freedom and justice, to the very earth itself.

Verse two takes us forward:

'Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God – what is good and acceptable and perfect.'

This can seem very hostile to society around the Church, which is a good thing if it means being hostile towards climate-change-denial or racism or the tyranny of the algorithm. Perhaps it also helps to hear Jesus' and Peter's exchange from the gospel: "who do you say that I am?"; "you are the Messiah, the Son of the living God." That is to say, all sorts of other competing voices and claimants to the throne are not God. That's where our boldness must lie, not opposed to the world per se, but wholly allied to Christ's Kingship; serving Him whose service is perfect freedom. And this means, as Paul goes on to say, not thinking more highly of ourselves than we ought to think; what might seem like claims of domination and arrogance have humility at their heart.

So, we are in all humility to seek the renewing of our minds and how timely that is in these days; we are to discern what is the will of God. How much is that my prayer: for me, now nearly a year in this place; for the parish; for the whole Church; for our nation; oh, for Solomon-like wisdom or - perhaps given some of his private life – for gospel-wisdom, for Christ-wisdom.

There are so many directions we might go in; there are so many powerful and important voices contributing to the debate about our future; so, what is the good and acceptable and perfect will of God? Again, St Paul offers us some basic functions of the Christian community, of the Body:

Prophecy – we must feel we can speak wisdom and hope into this crisis;

Ministry – we have work to do in our local communities, from schools to care homes, from Merton Citizens to the arts;

Teaching – we need to teach the faith and grow in our discipleship, so that we can witness to the love of God in our daily lives;

Exhortation – much of this may (we hope) be encouraging and inspiring; back to that stirring vision of a cause for all ages to commit their lives to;

Giving – this will include material resources, but means our whole lives offered to God as His Son spent His whole life for us;

Leading – maybe we as the Church (and with others) can lead the way, whether it is the climate crisis with our creation-theology or racial justice with the vision of the diverse yet-still-one Body;

Compassion – and all of these words need to be lived out in our daily lives where we come alongside others in love, in suffering, simply with the gift of ourselves for whomever we meet.

‘I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship.’

Amen.