

DORSET SOUTH AND WEST CIRCUIT

Service for Sunday September 20th 2020 by Chris Warren

Let us in stillness open ourselves to God's presence with us.

O Lord, give us of yourself above all

It is in your coming alone that we are enriched.

It is in your coming that true gifts come.

Come, Lord, that we may share the gifts of your presence.

Hymn: Abba Father (Sing out loud!)

Abba, Father, let me be, yours and yours alone.

May my will for ever be, ever more your own.

Never let my heart grow cold, never let me go,

Abba Father let me be, yours and yours alone. (x2)

Prayers of praise and thanksgiving

'I am the Alpha and the Omega', says the Lord God, who is and who was and who is to come; the Almighty. We come now into your presence.

Lord God we thank you for this new day and that you will walk with us. Your great love comes to us in calming, strengthening and healing.

Thank you that Dorchester is one of the safest places for covid19 in our country.

We are very grateful for our fellowship, for the care of the church in many different ways and for those who are working so hard.

We thank you that some people are now seeking and we pray for our response to them with the love of Jesus Christ.

Amen

A prayer of confession

Dear Lord, we are conscious of our failings. Forgive us if we have been so concerned for our own safety that we have failed to pray for and remember those who are perhaps more vulnerable.

Forgive us if we have been critical of others when they have been trying to help us be safe in uncertain times.

Forgive us for any lack of concern for those who are in much more dangerous situations than we are, such as those living in countries with limited health care like Burkina Faso.

May we hear Jesus Christ say, 'Your sins are forgiven'.

Amen

First reading: Matthew 20 vs. 1-16.

For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire labourers for his vineyard. After agreeing with the labourers for the usual daily wage, he sent them into the vineyard. When he went out about nine o'clock, he saw others standing idle in the market - place,

and he said to them, 'You also go to the vineyard, and I will pay you whatever is right. So they went. When he went out again about noon and about three o'clock, he did the same. About five o'clock he went out and found others standing around; and he said to them, 'Why are you standing here idle all day?' They said to him, 'No one has hired us'. He said to them, 'You also go into the vineyard'. When evening came the owner of the vineyard said to the manager, 'Call the labourers and give them their pay, beginning with the last and then going to the first'. When those hired about five o'clock came, each received the usual daily wage. Now when the first came, they thought they would receive more, but each of them also received the usual daily rate. When they received it they grumbled against the landowner, saying, 'These last worked only one hour, and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the day and the scorching heat'. He replied to one of them, 'Friend, I am doing you no wrong; did you not agree with me for the usual daily rate? Take what belongs to you and go; I choose to give to this last the same as you. Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me, or are you envious because I am generous? The last shall be first and the first last.'

Talk 1

I cannot imagine a story which is so opposite to our society. Our nation has been built on trade - more so than empire building. So an employer would never pay the same rate to someone who has worked one hour as to someone who has worked twelve! Further this parable leaves many unanswered questions e. g were the labourers there all day? If so why did the landowner not employ them first thing? If not, had they come at the end of the day hoping for work or were they the workers no employer wanted?

This method of employment is to us very uncaring. It is worse than zero hours contracts. However, this method was used on Liverpool docks during the 20th century. It reflects the total control of employers over workers. Let us remember that there would never need to have been trade unions if workers had been treated fairly.

Jesus' parables were not meant to be dissected as they made one clear point. The questions above are therefore not helpful. So, this parable is not about labour but about the first and last. The Jews as a nation thought they were special because God had chosen them and the disciples on occasions saw themselves in much the same way. The challenge is the same for us. We need to take care that we do not see ourselves as first and better than others. The parable is saying that the least likely will come first.

In Genesis we are reminded that we are made in God's image. There is no doubt that all of us have defaced that image but here the Celts saw a more positive way than our own traditions. We are all influenced by the last of the early fathers and surely the greatest thinker, Augustine of Hippo – but he was not necessarily right about everything! The understanding that has come down to us is that we are totally sinful and even our highest thoughts and deeds are run through with selfishness like 'Blackpool' in a stick of rock. The Celts believed that although we deface God's image, we could not destroy it. So there is basic good in everyone. When we meet others, we engage someone with the image of God in them. So, we are called first to love and seek in love to build on the spark - the image already there.

This sense does in no way modify the centrality of the cross as we all need forgiveness, but the challenge is to go in love and share Jesus' love with all.

As the landowner went out to offer hope to the labours so we go out in the same way. When we engage in community we are challenged to see others as having God's presence and also in need of healing, feeding, caring. This is what Jesus meant when he spoke of doing for the least was doing for him. As all people are different their needs will differ, so we need to allow them to share as we listen. Jesus was a great listening and his answers to questions were always challenging! Very Celtic. Very Chaplaincy!

Second reading: Colossians 1 vs. 15-20.

He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers – all things have been created through him and for him. He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together. He is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning, the first born from the dead, so that he might come to his first place in everything. For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and in him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through his cross.

Talk 2.

Our Jesus Christ is too small.

This passage is sometimes called the cosmic Christ because it talks about him being at the heart of all creation, not just the world but the whole universe. It is about the completeness and supremacy of Christ! He is also the image of God, not 'made in' but 'is'. This is a massive claim for just a few decades after Jesus' death and resurrection. There were still many people around who had walked, talked and eaten with Jesus and now to see him as God is really significant. The passage also reminds us that he makes peace for us with God through the cross. This is clearly central to our faith. However, there are further challenges as well. The events recorded in the gospels show that Jesus was involved in the whole of people's lives. Everything was sacred because of his kingdom presence. So, for us the whole of our lives matter to God and are an offering to him.

The Covid-19 virus has challenged us in many ways. A first I was scared, perhaps because of my recent health track record. Then I realised the advice given, if correct and followed, would keep us safe. Like me you will have devised coping mechanisms for the lockdown and one for me was more reading. I decided to go back to my collection of books about Celtic spirituality from the early 1990's. By taking them together I was able to compare and contrast different authors. One of the difficulties is recovering the truth and avoiding later distortions. One central theme is about feeling rather than intellect which shows a real difference from our traditions. I have found that trusting feelings is safe when they are led by the Spirit and they help us to deepen our faith. When listening to others we need to seek where they are on their journey of life and see how we can be ambassadors for Christ. Like them we all need change to better reflect God's image in us. We can make this journey together as we journey in the kingdom.

Change is of course personal but also corporate. How do we share in the vision of Revd John White transforming community in 17th C Dorchester? How do we catch the vision to recover the wonderfully rich creation which God has loaned to us?

Prayers of intercession

Our Lord, we pray for all on the front line during the current crisis. May they be protected from Covid-19.

We pray for all who have contracted the virus that they may recover to full health.

We remember those working to recover their businesses, and for the Chaplains who are serving them so well especially since the lockdown.

We remember those nations where it is much harder to control the virus.

Please be with all seeking to develop a vaccine that it may be safe and available soon.

We pray for all minority groups in our nation who feel undervalued and may we listen and act.

Please guide us as we welcome new people to the church and reach out that we may live the love of the Lord Jesus. May our deeds be motivated by your leading.

Amen.

Hymn. (Please sing out loud again)

God's spirit is in my heart; he has called me and set me apart.

This is what I have to do, what I have to do:

He sent me to give the good news to the poor, tell prisoners that they are prisoners no more,

Tell blind people that they can see, and set the downtrodden free,

And go tell everyone the news that the kingdom of God has come;

And go tell everyone the news that God's kingdom has come.

Just as the Father sent me, so I'm sending you out to be

My witness throughout the world, the whole of the world.

(Chorus)

Don't worry what you will say; don't worry because on that day

God's Spirit will speak in your heart-will speak in your heart.

(Chorus)

Closing:

In the power of the Creator, in the peace of the Redeemer, in the Presence of the Spirit,

..we are sent out.

AMEN