

Revd. Simon Lewis

Sunday 18 July

Theme: Trinity 7

## Isolation Radio Talk

### The signs of the Spirit

Good Morning

Once there were checkpoints on the borders between many countries on the mainland of Europe. At one a man came through pushing a wheelbarrow; border guards searched it and let it go on; that evening the man returned, empty handed. The same happened the next day and the next, and the next. The guards were suspicious; they knew he must be smuggling something. They searched him and everything in the wheelbarrow day after day. One day they said, 'We give up - we know you're smuggling something - come on tell us what it is. 'That is simple', said the man, 'I am smuggling wheelbarrows.'

There it was, hidden in plain sight. When you ask for signs of the Holy Spirit the answer should be the same, 'hidden in plain sight'; they should be obvious, not even noticed, because they are the lived experience of a disciple of Jesus Christ; being a follower of Jesus is marked by a life that has a God reference; a God reference that is bathed in prayer; prayer that is Christ centred; it points to that special gift of love; the love of God.

Come back to the beginning, to the evidence of the Gospels. Quickly you discover what a varied group of people were those close to Jesus - close to our Lord. Some among them would be unattractive in different ways. I do not think Peter was easy to be with; self-opinionated, often wrong. I think the apostle Paul would have been even more difficult. I think I would feel completely inadequate in his presence. In the gospels you can often detect the difference between the response of the disciples and the way Jesus treated people and situations. He takes pity on a large crowd who have eaten nothing. His disciples say, 'send them away'; Jesus says 'feed them'. Jesus finds the disciples arguing about who was going to get the most important jobs. When he needed them most, confronted with that focus of evil intent from both cosmic and worldly powers, his disciples desert him.

If I want to look at what difference the Holy Spirit makes, I contrast how that small group of men and women were, before and after the incredible eruption on the Feast of Pentecost in Jerusalem that year. Before the day, I would judge them to be obedient but confused; confined behind closed doors. They feared they were neither credible of belief, nor to be believed; they were afraid of ridicule, arrest and worse. In our terms they were a church lacking confidence, unable to give voice even to the most dramatic of experiences; a church unsure of its mission, guilt ridden for past failures; unsure of what to say or how to say it. When they spoke among themselves about what had happened it was still in a whisper; they had no confidence to say, what they later said with a mighty shout, "*He is risen, He is risen. He will come again, he will come again.*"

No one who reads Christian Scripture, no honest unbeliever, can avoid the conclusion that on a particular day in Jerusalem, something happened, something which transformed them for ever, and moreover, transforms them still; something of cosmic significance.

The deep spiritual experience was that Christ was with them. That enables us, still to say, there is never a moment when God is absent from Creation. When you turn your back on God, God is denied but God has not gone; when you turn to Christ again his promise is renewed: 'I am with you always, to the end of the age' (Matthew 28.20). You will recognise that the pilgrimage of the Church of God represents all the struggles and all the journeys of faith that women and men, old and young have made in the past, and you make today. You carry the complexities of today's living; you travel with the luggage of our history in a world now so different than that of first century Palestine.

Jesus Christ as a great teacher carries still a wonderful fascination. Yet to say, as Christians say, Jesus Christ is the Son of God, is more of a problem now in the United Kingdom and cross the world. There is not much understanding outside the Church nor is there a common core of values. A recent survey showed that Shell and McDonalds are better known than the Cross. That may be true but those who think of Jesus only as a moral teacher, need to be reminded that the Good News, The Gospel, he brought, was about God. He spoke to a world where belief in God was natural and taken for granted. It is no longer so. Like the song writer of the Jews in captivity you question how 'how could we sing the Lord's song in a foreign land' (Psalm 137.4).

The strange land is one where either God is absent; or a land where what is offered as Gospel - good news - is of a god who is cruel or inadequate. I am comfortable, though fearful, of the idea of a cosmic struggle beyond time and space, church, and society; you need just read the Book of Revelation, the last book in the Christian Scripture. That struggle, interacting with the processes of the world, leads to anarchy and destruction or to liberation and salvation. What it means is that those who radically follow the Christian road are critically and creatively involved so that the Church may be a sign of the God's realm; a sign that God acts in the world constantly challenging the values of the world: that proclaims a new vision of the kingdom; that makes commitment possible. That is the Christ who heals the legion of devils; stills the storm of our self-will; walks with us on the waters of life without fear; by the gift of the Spirit come at Pentecost, he joins earth and heaven.

One last word: it is about God's left hand. For the whole world, so for the Church, COVID-19 must result in great transformation; let it be for the better. For the Christian woman and man, it is inevitable there will be new ways of being the Church, new ways of working. All of us must grasp the opportunity to explore the riches of worship and service which, through Christ, are our joy, and his gift to the world he loves.

## **Prayer**

Let us pray.

Loving God,  
though our destination is not yet clear,  
may we trust in your graceful promises;  
though we are uncertain of ourselves,  
may we be rooted in your loving regard;  
though our attention is inclined to wander,  
may we hear the things you are saying;  
though we often neglect your influence,  
may we be convicted of your power to transform,  
in Jesus Christ our Lord.  
Amen.