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Dear Friends,

Gentle Jesus meek and mild....NO WAY

Matthew 10:24-39

Like many clergy I have often wondered whether all the effort that goes into preparing a sermon is worth it. Let's be honest, there's not too many sermons we can remember – probably because they are often tedious, boring or uninspiring – and, yes, I refer to my own sermons as well as those I've had both the pain and pleasure of listening to!! When I was first ordained it used to take me hours and hours reading the scriptures over and over again, time spent looking through commentaries and sometimes even getting inspiration from other preachers. I would make notes and somehow attempt to craft something that I could call a sermon. As time went by I realised I was incapable of delivering an address, prepared essay fashion, days ahead of the “performance moment”. Now I read the scriptures and commentaries early in the week and then I ponder and pray and listen, asking what on earth God is saying to us, not just me, through the biblical narrative in 21st century Wales. Now and again the “magic moment”, that some might call inspiration from above, comes early in the week but at other times it happens only in the night or early hours of Sunday morning. The hardest task of the preacher is to make an ancient story's message real for today – a sermon is an attempt to do theology in the voice, context and culture in which it is preached. That's why one always knows if a preacher has nicked another person's work!!



Like every preacher I have my favourite texts and ones I'd rather ignore. Some texts are really hard to handle - texts that indicate women should be subservient, that slaves should be treated fairly rather than released. Some texts frankly make no sense without a bit of study – could it really be true that God has been on the side of one particular tribe ensuring their battles are won and their enemies destroyed or that generations suffer for the sins of their forebears? Why is it that a message from God in one part of the bible is contradicted when we dare to say “This is the word of the Lord” in church? All these things need careful interpretation and an understanding of the context in which the writer penned his words, and a recognition that we, too, believe God is on our side when things go well for us.

Perhaps the hardest message to convey is found in this Sunday's gospel message, that all those who follow Jesus will face trials, sufferings, betrayals, threats, discord within their families and perhaps even death. Our children's leaders will dance around this gospel message just telling our youngsters to have courage or be brave when they face life's challenges. We adults may be tempted to pretend these words of warning and danger have significance only for a small group of people once upon a time and that they have nothing to say to us today. Yet Matthew writes not just for those amongst whom he worships but so that others in the years to come will hear and interpret the message of Jesus afresh in their generation. In Matthew's gospel, Jesus tells his friends “If they've called the master of the house Beelzebul, how much more will they malign those of his household?” In other words, if you have heard the words “come and follow me”, then expect to be mocked and harmed and treated like the one who called you. Now Beelzebul is the name of a Philistine god or prince of the demons. Similarly Beelzebub, the Canaanite god Baal found in the Hebrew Bible and gospel narrative, is translated literally ‘Lord of the Flies’. So in scripture, literature and our own imaginations, Beelzebul is just about top of the demonic hierarchy and so we hear that if they think Jesus is the devil incarnate we must understand that others are bound to think we are mad, bad or as possessed as Him when we speak out. Despite this, Jesus tells those who will listen “do not fear”. Why? Because the riskiest endeavours will have the greatest consequences.

Like thousands around the globe I sense that Greta Thunberg is a prophet in our time - do you remember her "how dare you" speech? "You have stolen my dreams and my childhood with your empty words", she told the world leaders gathered in the UN Assembly. "People are dying," she said, "and all you can talk about is money and fairy tales of eternal economic growth. How dare you?" Today, reflecting on the death of George Floyd and the "black lives matter" protests around the world, a teenage girl reminds us, just as Jesus once did, that we have "passed a social tipping point we can no longer look away from what our society has been ignoring for so long whether it is equality, justice or sustainability"

Long ago some suspected Prince Charles had lost the plot, talking to trees, worrying about the many ways we damage the planet, questioning our use of antibiotics and pesticides and pointing out the ills in society. Is he also a prophet in our time? The work of The Prince's Trust has done so much to address injustice and shape the lives of young people today.

One day "those things whispered in secret will be shouted from the housetops" so don't be scared of what they will say about you Jesus says but only fear the one who can redeem your body and your soul. On this Father's Day Sunday we are reminded what a perfect daddy looks like - sparrows might be sold for a penny but not one will "fall to the ground unperceived." Just as a father will never forget the newborn child whose face he gazes at stroking his downy head "even the hairs of your head are counted."

Matthew's gospel is, in a way, a long commentary on what it means to deny self and follow Jesus. Human behaviours matter and have eternal consequences. There is no way out; we cannot evade responsibility or pretend the message was for once upon a time long ago. The one who brings a peace that passeth human understanding also says, "I have not come to bring peace, but a sword". This new way of being is so radical in its message of love for the lost, the weak and the despised, that it will challenge the status quo and upset not just political but family life. Charles Wesley might have thought up "Gentle, Jesus meek and mild" but I can't find evidence for that in my bible. Jesus reminds us that the gospel may divide not unite our families.

That's a hard message in the week when ordinands around the world should be going away in groups on retreat and readying themselves to emerge in our cathedrals and churches wearing dog collars for the first time with their anxious families looking at them in a mix of pride, fear and confusion. I have been so looking forward to welcoming Belinda Huxtable back as a newly ordained Deacon next Sunday. For the last few weeks since her theological training ended at St Padarn's, she has enjoyed a break before being launched as the curate in our parish. Sadly, this year will be very different. There will be no public ordinations attended by hundreds here or probably anywhere else in the world but please do pray for Belinda as she prepares for all that lies ahead.



Thankfully it is so much easier to be loved when you are a curate serving in a new place away from home – or, as Jesus puts it, "No prophet is accepted in his own town or amongst his own people". But even if that is true it won't be easy according to today's gospel. Or, as a wise priest told me when I began my first post of responsibility, "If they all love you, then you are doing a bad job!" There will be challenges ahead for every new curate who embarks upon the joys and sorrows of ministry. Belinda comes to us bringing many gifts and past experiences but she also arrives in our midst as one still in training. As I pray for her I pray too that you will love her and forgive her and make her welcome as she learns to be the public face of God's Church in our communities

Yours in Christ,

**Vicki
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