

Epiphany 4 2019 ASP second Stewardship Sunday

The gospel reading follows on from last week when Jesus announced his mission in the synagogue of Nazareth., good news for the poor, liberty to captives and to set the down trodden free. Initially he won great approval and the people were astonished by his words.

Yet when he did not say what they wanted to hear the mood changed, and like many prophets before him Jesus was rejected. The people couldn't accept the truth he was telling them.

Sermon:

Love takes no pleasure in other people's sins but delights in the truth; it is ready to excuse, to trust, to hope and to endure whatever comes.'

May the Word of God be spoken, may the Word.....

It has been reported recently that

a. Seven Christians in Laos spent five days behind bars after police raided their Christmas church service on 29 December 2018. They were charged with holding an "illegal" church service without permission.

Nine police officers swooped on the church in Nakanong village, arresting three church leaders in the middle of the worship, and returning later that evening to arrest another four Christians. They came back a third time to demolish the stage, cut off the power line, destroy the sound system and seize three mobile phones. The seven were later freed on 2 January.

b. In China, A government-approved church in Dongcun village, Henan province, was ordered to erase the First Commandment during an inspection by 30 government officials on 1 November 2018.

One official is reported to have ordered that the First Commandment, “You shall have no other gods before me”, be removed from the Ten Commandments displayed in the front of the pulpit, saying it was “national policy”. Other officials then wiped off the words. Later the church took down all the Commandments from display under pressure from the authorities.

In 2018, the Chinese communist government’s White Paper on religion announced new policies of “sinicisation” (i.e. making Chinese) with the intention of selectively reinterpreting Christianity and Scripture.

c. Christians in MYANMAR, PAKISTAN AND EGYPT – and giving thanks that their PRAYERS were ANSWERED and they could celebrate Christmas in safety. Attempted attacks on churches were foiled in Egypt and Pakistan.

d. In Nigeria Christians declared a national day of prayer in the run up to the presidential election, which is set to be held on 16 February, amid a recent spate of attacks by Islamic militants. Christian leaders have called for a “free, fair and credible election” that is “violence-free and without any bloodshed”.

We may well wonder:

what it is about a faith we can very easily take for granted that can generate such opposition and fear in people and regimes around the world. We may we wonder about how people can live under such regimes and under such threat to their very existence. And yet congregations are living out their calling, living by faith, and seeking to be prayerful and missional.

In today’s gospel, which follows on from last week, Jesus has been enthusiastically acclaimed in the synagogue at Nazareth

for announcing the promised Jubilee, which he called 'the year of the Lord's favour'.

The whole mood suddenly changes. The listeners become so set against him that he is in mortal danger.

But what was it that happened to make the crowd turn on him so quickly?

They were upset because Jesus had been working all kinds of miracles and healings in Capernaum and other places, only now returning to his home town of Nazareth. Jesus does not apologise. In fact, he antagonises them further by telling them that his mission and 'the year of the Lord's favour' will NOT be restricted to them, but will extend to non-Jews and gentiles.

He reminds them of two non-Jews, recorded in their scriptures, as blessed by God. (the cure of the widow of Zarephath and the cure of Naaman) The members of the synagogue have a sense of privilege, are pleased to have a local boy recognised as a miracle worker, but they want to keep the best things from themselves. They want to keep God and God's favours within their own closed group.

So the sense of privilege, of having some special status with Jesus, quickly dissipates as it dawns on them that they are going to get no special treatment. (How dare he suggest that outsiders would be preferred to them) What should have been joy at the thought of many being helped by Jesus turns to rage that he would freely bestow the Lord's favour. The congregation show their lack of openness to Jesus' message by pushing him out of the synagogue and are prepared to hurl him off a cliff, yet Jesus slips through the crowd to continue his work elsewhere.

Sadly, religion sometimes brings out the worst in people. It makes them narrower, more bigoted and more prone to hate and even kill. Religion can get distorted and turn into fanaticism and bigotry. True religion leads people away from narrow-mindedness, cold-heartedness and intolerance to universalism

God's love isn't just for Christians. It is for everybody. And just love it is. In the first reading, the Lord says, 'Before I formed you in the womb I knew you'. In the second reading, Paul talks about a love that takes no pleasure in other people's sin but delights in the truth'. This reading is often heard at weddings, but the love it highlights goes beyond love of partner. It is love that is a way of life. It is a love that should characterise Christian communities and a love that should extend to all people.

True religion liberates the heart and mind and fosters mutually enriching relationships with others. A question each of us must ask is, What does religion bring out in me? How am I living differently because of my faith? There are 3 things that last says St Paul, faith, hope and love, and the greatest of these is love.

Jesus calls on us to be open and loving outside our own community. He urges us not to be suspicious of new people or people who are different, or of people just because they come from a different cultural, religious or social background. We are asked not to settle for the security of the club, but to embrace newness and take risks for the sake of God's kingdom. To embrace this mission will call us out of our comfort zones and challenge us to be witnesses of love in a divided world.

We do not face the challenges that face many of our brothers and sisters around the world. In many ways it is easy to belong to a church – but it is much more challenging to actually live the gospel. One of those challenges is the financial one and today is the second of our Stewardship Sundays. We are here Sunday by Sunday to support each other, to worship, pray, to be built up as the body of Christ, and to be sent into the world. We heard Paul speak of the church as a body, everyone is different, everyone is needed, everyone can do something, **and** no one can do everything. We are here to find our role, that part we can play that others cannot. We are here to become the people we are created to be and make our full contribution to the growth of god's kingdom.

Two weeks ago Paul Adams preached on the theme of how do we please God with our money. Paul said that we are all on a journey of discipleship, learning to be more like Jesus. He spoke of Planned Giving being part of the journey. And that we please God when we contribute to His work. And we please God when we give to Him first.

Within two years the parish share has increased £10 000 to £70 000 for this year. We did pay the share last year. So thank you! Thank you that the number of Planned Givers has increased and that the money that comes in has increased. We paid that Share of £66 000, but did so by using some of our unrestricted funds. We are in a situation where our outgoings are more than our income.

You will see from the paperwork that the Stewardship Committee have prepared and given out that our budget for

this year is £97 000 and the aim is that 65 will come in from Planned Giving.

Yes, it's a lot and is a challenge, yet if each person on Planned Giving earned the minimum wage and gave 5 % there would be no problem! We, in reality, are all different within the body, some can give more, some less some the same, yet together....

Our life together is more than gathering for worship on Sunday and maintaining the fabric, as important s that is.

A year ago we published a MAP (Mission Action Plan) and much has been achieved....

Our hope is that we can do more than just pay our way – our hope is that we can be a place where we work together, as followers of Jesus, to be good news to the poor, to proclaim liberty to captives, to free the oppressed.

MAP: hopes for fabric certainly – audio, decoration of the church, but hopes for the young, the enhancement of our music, perhaps with choral scholarships, WNS follow on after 4 years...support mission and charitable work, communications....

So please consider the information about Giving that is going out and consider prayerfully your response, so that together we may flourish as a body – a body in which all take part.

Almighty God, by whose grace alone we are accepted and called to your service: strengthen us by your Holy Spirit and make us worthy of our calling; through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord. Amen