

Sermon, St Andrew's
Sexagesima (also ATC Sunday)

1 Corinthians 9.16-23, Mark 1.29-39 (also Isaiah 40: 21-31)

May we proclaim the good news of Thy love, dear Lord, in all we are and say and do, now and ever, through the power of Thy Holy Spirit, in the Name of Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

“Preach the Gospel” say both St Paul and our Lord this morning.

“Preach the Gospel”. This may ring a bit hollow to many of us cooped up at home (again) just now. How can we preach the Gospel?

“Preach the Gospel”, says St Francis, “by every means: use words if you have to”. Preaching is most often associated with speech (though now we read!) - and unfortunately sometimes with lecturing, hectoring or other unattractive modes of speaking!

But “proclaiming the good news” is drawn far wider than that in both our Gospel and Epistle this morning, and thankfully far easier for many of us!

The good news, of God's saving love and power coming into the world through His Spirit in Jesus Christ, does not, and never has, just consisted of talking to people. This morning's Gospel talks a lot about “proclaiming the message” being inseparable from caring for the sick - and especially anyone in any kind of mental distress. The hours many of us spend on the phone at present are very close to the heart of the Gospel.

St Paul, as elsewhere, can seem in this reading perhaps a little less attractive than our Saviour. The phrase “all things to all men” has come to smack of hypocrisy, of going along with whoever we speak to - and yet, for him, it is clearly rooted and grounded in a

compulsive passion for sharing the saving love of Christ by every possible means. It is also at the root of the Naval approach to chaplaincy, I believe! A Padre takes the rank of whoever he ministers to: from the newest, nervous midshipman, to the oldest admiral. I wish my Air Cadet organisation took this wisdom from the Senior Service, the Royal Navy: as an Air Cadet Padre, I find having a particular rank, with its due respects and courtesies, a real barrier to open conversation. I am called to be “all things to all men”, whether with a bullied or bored Cadet, or a harassed staff colleague with a multitude of problems - or a fellow Padre among the team for whom I help to care! What does “all things to all men” mean to you, as you speak to different people through your week, put yourself in their shoes? How do you best listen to all with integrity?

This morning’s Gospel contains one version of a favourite incident in our Lord’s life - when everyone is searching for him and can’t find Him! I find it most reassuring that He wasn’t always available for everyone, and took - and needed - time alone to pray. In St Mark’s Gospel, Christ always prays alone, outside - and at night. In this most breathless, busy and shortest of Gospels (originally all in the present tense - “now Jesus does this... and now this is happening... now this...”), our Saviour takes time to reconnect to base, to recharge His batteries, to commune with His Father and ours; to be quiet, to be still, to pour out His heart, and to be “refreshed in the multitude of peace” (a Psalm He knew, I’m sure). So, how shall we preach the Gospel? By all means (especially care) - by being all things to all people - and by recharging our batteries in prayer.

Today is ATC Sunday, when unfortunately Cadets cannot gather for their 80th anniversary celebration. The Air Cadet Organisation

“is not dead, but sleepeth” - many Cadets are now too old to continue, and many have dropped off from frustration with online activities rather lacking in mud, guns or flying! But last week I had the privilege to spend time with the new junior NCOs from all the Durham and Northumberland Wing, the nucleus from whom we will reawake, recruit, regenerate and rebuild - to thank them, to try to help their personal and spiritual development, and to offer them what support I can - to be all things to them all, and to their hardworking staff. I gave half my slot to a Wing Commander specialising in mental health and resilience support, to show the priority I give to that help, especially at present.

But our work of proclaiming the Gospel “at all times and in all places” also has a hidden root this morning. We normally read an Epistle and Gospel - but the Worldwide Council of Churches also recommends an Old Testament reading: this morning, the second half of Isaiah 40 of which we read the first half in Advent. This reading roots and grounds our identity, and our preaching (by whatever means), in the glory of God, in the vastness of vision of which I spoke in December, and soars to its final verse of renewal, of strengthening, of sustaining, and encouragement - I won't quote it here: please look it up!

So, then, may we all proclaim the good news of Christ's love rooted in the Father's glory, sustained by His strength, empowered by His Spirit, and renewed by reconnecting to God in prayer: to walk alongside all in need, to share that love by every method, without limit. In the words of an Epiphany blessing, may

*“Christ the Son of God perfect in you the image of His glory, and gladden your hearts with the good news of His Kingdom”; in the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. **AMEN.***