

**25<sup>th</sup> October 2020 (Trinity 20)**

Can we think or behave differently? (Fr. Mike)

- [Deuteronomy 34.1-12](#)
- [Psalm 90.1-6,13-17](#)
- [1 Thessalonians 2.1-8](#)
- [Matthew 22.34-46](#)

A famous surgeon once told his students that in order to be a good surgeon you needed two gifts: firstly, freedom from nausea and secondly, the power of observation. To demonstrate his point, he then dipped his finger into some nauseating fluid and licked it, requesting each student to do the same. They each in turn dutifully applied themselves, completing the task without flinching. Then, with a smile the teacher said, “Ladies and Gentlemen, I congratulate you on having passed the first test. But not, unfortunately, the second – because not one of you noticed that the finger I licked was *not* the one I dipped into the fluid!”

In every generation and every season, awareness is key...

Most will be aware (but some will not) that we have now had the last day of British Summertime 2020 – and as such, is officially the ‘death of summer,’ because our calendar required us all as a nation to faithfully reset our timepieces before going to bed last night (allowing all clocks and watches to ‘fall back’ an hour) so that we can begin to accept the next season of winter that begins for us this morning - approaching all that may have in store for us as individuals and as a community. Mobile telephones will of course automatically reset. We humans, on the other hand, usually resist this inevitable change and can neither automatically nor easily shift gear to ‘winter mode.’ We often need to be reminded that the time of change is here once again...

Today's lesson from Deuteronomy tells the story of the last days of Moses and the beginning of Joshua's leadership.

The Israelites were also in need of constant prodding, and although we may think that the current pandemic means that 'change is the only constant' for us at the moment, it is nothing compared to the ever-changing physical and spiritual landscape encountered by Moses and his people...

In their mourning over Moses' death, the community remembers the profound ways in which God, through Moses, changed their lives. They were exiles by famine from their land, enslaved by the Egyptians, and indebted to Pharaoh. But Moses became their advocate, leading them out of slavery, across the Sea of Reeds, and through the long years (40 years) of the wilderness. Throughout these four generations of time, Moses took all their complaints and whining, and advocated for food, water, and safety. Moses took their metaphorical wanderings, then delivered a new law from the Lord. Moses organized their community and empowered the next generation to lead. Moses' death reminds the people of Israel all they have been through. Their mourning is where they find themselves in the present: no longer wandering, but not yet into their next phase of life. And this is perhaps where we can draw a measure of comfort in our own situation as we wonder, with the psalmist, what lies ahead for us over the winter season and into next year in our own land ...

**'Let thy work appear unto thy servants, and thy glory unto their children'** (v16).

Moses' death also points them to their future. Moses has already blessed Joshua as their next leader, and Joshua, as we know, will take them into the Promised Land. Moses is even given the gift of seeing the beauty of that land, as far as the

eye can see. Though Moses knows he is not to cross over, God shows him all that is to come. The vision is vast, abundant, and blessed. We suspect Moses can die in peace having seen the land of milk and honey, even if he himself will not experience the land. And Moses has already seen Joshua receive the spirit of wisdom. There is nothing left to do but join God in the heavenly kingdom.

On days of introspection about the past, present, and future, we can easily gloss over all the hard stuff. We do not often get a sympathetic retelling of the Israelite story. Today, the people of Israel honour their esteemed leader, and they have the Promised Land ahead of them - as indeed do we...

In our case however, more is expected. Not only are we to live and deliver the Holy Gospel handed down to us, as Christians we are expected to emulate the efforts of St. Paul - as his letter to the people of Thessalonica (Greece) reminds us this morning - by deliberately offering **'also our own souls'** (v.8). **In other words, where there is an extra mile that *could*, with effort on our part, be travelled, we are encouraged to do so because all people are meant to be dear to us.**

For us then, today's collect for Trinity 20 might be helpful:

**O Almighty and most merciful God, of thy bountiful goodness keep us, we beseech thee, from all things that may hurt us; that we, being ready both in body and soul, may cheerfully accomplish those things that thou wouldest have done; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.**

## Conclusions

Not only are we to display tenacity, persevering through all adversity and trusting that God is ultimately indeed in control of everything, we are also expected to put 100% effort into doing our bit, as it were, to achieve his will.

**Love as explained by our gospel is not passive emotion, but active mercy.**

Marked by patience and generosity - again, both acts generated by the one who loves. Moses, the prophets, the disciples, Jesus, all in their time demonstrated that - **in short, loving is a choice, not a feeling.**

If we can replace our cultural clichés about love with a biblical understanding of love, we can begin to make our way to loving God and neighbour as directed by Matthew's account of the **'great commandment'** today. We are commanded to love an intangible God as a matter of duty, despite feeling that he is often distant and remote.

As we lick our own spiritual fingers, we are instinctively aware of viewing and responding to our surroundings through our own prism - consequently we only experience half the story.

Likewise, loving our neighbour is difficult. If love is merely our passive response to the person next to us, we are likely to be more often repulsed than moved to love. How can one legitimately look into the face of an enemy and feel unqualified love? It is nearly impossible. To love God with all our heart, mind, and soul seems nearly impossible when we think of love as simply an emotion.

### **Biblical love is something we do.**

But, biblical love is not passive. It is not something that occurs to us without our control or will. It is loving-kindness, merciful action that is both generous and continuous. This is the good news for Christian people. To love neighbour as oneself is to act toward the other as one would act toward those close to you. We treat the stranger as well as we treat those that we love emotionally.

### **When the action to each is equal, the love to each is equal.**

This is counter to what we expect, but it is in keeping with what the commandment requires. This means that, to those with whom we are intimate, to those we do not know, to those who may be seen as either dirty or repugnant, and even to those who harm us, we can act according to the law of Christian love. We can choose to be merciful and gracious. To love the neighbour 'as ourselves' is to make a conscious choice and to then act upon it.

### **And what about love of God?**

Again, as God chose Israel and elected to forgive her at every offense, so we can choose God and serve him in every way.

We can love with our heart - through generosity to all God's people.

We can love with our soul – simply by worshiping God and praying for our neighbours and ourselves.

And we can love with our minds – by studying God's Word and letting it correct us, enlighten us, and send us out in loving action to the world.

Finally, see how these two commandments are connected -

"the first and great commandment" and the " the second, which is like unto it"?

**When we love God's people, we are always, and at the same time loving God.**

They are inseparable. Surprisingly, *sometimes* our emotions follow suit and we actually feel a love of other, or a love of God. But please remember that the *emotion* is not commanded. Only the *action* of love is commanded.

Thankfully for every season and every generation since Moses, the good news persists – namely that in Christ, we can **all** do this - we **can** all avoid falling back into bad or selfish habits by regularly resetting ourselves as commanded, even when we don't feel like it.

Amen!

Fr. Mike (25<sup>th</sup> October 2020)