

Sermon at St John's Parish Eucharist, 1st October 2017

'Therefore my beloved' Paul writes, 'work out your own salvation with fear and trembling; for it is God who is at work in you.' (Philippians 2.12)

Paul wasn't content just to teach – as he wrote to his Church at Philippi, in Macedonia – but like any good teacher (good, yes; but also irritating!) he also set them homework. And their homework, this time, at the end of some amazing words about Jesus, was this: to 'work out your own salvation with fear and trembling'. Sounds a bit scary, doesn't it? Like working out why $E=MC^2$ or why the earth rotates around the sun.

But despite first appearances and our fear of the unknown, it's one of the most life-giving, joyful and affirming things we can ever do. Indeed, for the Christian, it's homework so important to our future, that we need to embrace it whole-heartedly (St Paul says) and without delay. So what does it mean to work out our own salvation, with fear and trembling – both personally, and as a Christian community? And how might we set about it?

Our Collect today speaks of the double challenge, for us to 'perceive and know what we ought to do', and have 'grace and power to fulfil' the same. And this ties in with a common thread weaving through each of our readings, the contrast between obedience & disobedience to the word of God:

- For the people of God in Ezekiel's day the challenge was made worse by the reality of exile, acute hardship and loss. Nonetheless, the prophet reminds them, each is responsible for their own actions (you can't blame your parents). And therefore, the people must repent, turning from their iniquities and putting on a new heart and a new spirit, which God will give them. As the Psalmist puts it, 'Remember, O Lord, your compassion and love... Lead me in your truth and teach me, for you are the God of my salvation.'
- Today's Gospel is more cryptic – a curious dialogue between Jesus and the chief priests about his authority to do the things he does; and this is followed by the parable of the two sons: both of which say one thing and do another: as we're all prone to at times. But as we come to its conclusion, its message becomes frighteningly clear. The ones who are obedient to God's invitation are not the religious ones, as one might expect – they're too complacent – but sinners: these are the ones open to repentance and embracing God's new future.
- And in this context of choices and challenges to be faced, Paul doesn't spare pulling his punches either, for he makes clear (as Ezekiel did) that all of us – as followers of Jesus – are responsible for our actions: for working out our own salvation, as he puts it, with fear and trembling. But in this we are not alone, rather we are co- collaborators with God, who in Jesus Christ is alongside us and within us, working with us – for our own best possible good.

So how do we work out our own salvation with fear and trembling?

It's a question that I'm doing much reflection on, at this time, as we seek to discern together the way God may be calling us to develop as a parish:

- How do we, following the recent British Social Attitudes survey – showing that more people now say they have no religious affiliation, than belief in God – proclaim the reality of God and the continuing relevance of Jesus Christ, in our own context?
- How do we build genuine and authentic Christian community in a culture that no longer knows what community means?
- How do we engage meaningfully with the many thousands of young people who live or study in our parish, bringing energy, vibrancy and life, but also profound questions not being met by the culture

around them? +I'm glad to say, after initial approaches, I now have entrees into seven local schools & colleges in or just beyond the parish.

- And how do we (as well as caring for those within) turn outwards to truly listen to the needs of our neighbourhood, and make our Church accessible to them – to the cries of the lonely, the disabled, the anxious, the stressed out, and those left behind by economic progress?

And what then, beyond the corporate level of our common Christian life and faith, might it mean for you & I, personally, to work out our own salvation with fear and trembling; and this is surely the crux of the matter – because one naturally leads to the other.

In 1843 the Danish philosopher, Soren Kierkegaard published one of his seminal works, entitled 'Fear and Trembling' and drawing directly from Philippians 2.12, today's reading; and it makes fascinating reading, as well as speaking directly into the challenge of faith, at the heart of today's world. Kierkegaard was a powerful Christian thinker and his hopeful understand of what faith means, contrasted with the opposite school of Nietzsche, whose belief in raw power rejected traditional Christianity, and foreshadowed the ominous events of the 20th Century.

Kierkegaard believed in faith as the most real and enduring form of passion, which, combined with love, made life worth living, and connected us with the reality of divine action in our world. And it is this raw faith – a faith which involves moving beyond our own immediate security – that lies at the heart of 'working out our salvation with fear and trembling', because it means a willingness to surrender our own power to God's power, our will to His. 'Faith is a marvel' Kierkegaard writes, 'and yet no human being is excluded from it.' + 'Faith's paradox, then, is this' he writes, 'it determines our relation to the universal, through our relation to God.'

At the end of the day we don't need to understand all of these things, in order to follow Paul's advice. All we need to do, to take our homework seriously, is take time to grapple with what our salvation means, in prayerful discernment and loving action. Something that will be different for each one of us, as we respond to God, and collaborate with him, through heart and mind and will, in our own particular situation – and at this particular point in time.

And the great thing is we're never alone (St Paul tells us) - because Christ is with us & within us, longing for our greater good; that we might become whom God made us to be (each wonderfully created in his image, with particular gifts) - and we have one another, in Christian community. A community of people caring for one another and striving to work out what our salvation means. And for those prepared for the long haul, we have a great many other resources to, to help us:

- we have the immense wellspring of the Bible as a means of prayer and listening to what God, at every moment, is saying to us;
- we have the opportunity of spiritual direction or meeting with others in small groups;
- & we have many riches handed down through our Christian tradition, including the writings of St Ignatius Loyola, one of the greatest teachers of wisdom in discerning the will of God.

All of which I look forward to exploring with you during our upcoming Year of Prayer & Spirituality, starting in November.

For what matters in the end, is not just talking about prayer, but engaging in living prayer (day by day), through which we discover God truly loving us and at work in us, guiding us to hear him and to follow him, working out our own salvation – here & now - in practical & down to earth ways.

And let me finish, as we take time to consider our own response to God and all that he yearns to fulfil in us and through his church, by repeating today's Collect:

O Lord, we beseech you mercifully to hear the prayers of your people who call upon you; and grant that [we] may both perceive and know what things we ought to do, and also have grace and power to fulfil them; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen