

3rd before Lent

We have just heard Luke's Sermon on the 'Plain' contrasting with Matthew's Sermon on the 'Mount'. They use shared material but tell their stories with a different emphasis and energy.

Monty Python had great fun, I remember, imagining Jesus in front of huge crowds and mishearing much of what he said. They played on that echo effect of saying who was blessed and who was cursed. 'Blessed are you who are poor' and the rejoinder, 'Woe to you who are rich' – Luke writes passionately on material wealth and his suggestion of our material waste.

And, of course, to this day, placards of all protest movements use this same kind of messaging. 'Stop Sizewell C' is a clear enough placard which I have seen locally; I have not seen its opposite 'Start Sizewell C' – apart from those more elaborate colourful news-sheets by EDF Energy, which sometimes, accidentally, pop through our doors!

Musicians of different genres, also, still make 'protest songs'. Behind every kind of campaign there are people who are passionately **for** something in particular and, understandably there are people equally passionate **against** that same issue or cause.

But however many differences there are between the detail of the different accounts of the Beatitudes, there is a clear, **united** and Gospel view: that Jesus' words, his powerful oratory is there to lead us in a certain direction which he

learnt from the long line of the prophets. We have to choose between right and wrong, between justice and injustice, inclusivity and exclusivity. So yes, whether we are hearing appalling prejudice and malpractice within our largest police force or, of a well-paid footballer who abuses his cats, there has to be that boundary of decency which must be respected and not broken up. There is then, a place for taking sides, for righteous anger, for protest.

We don't today use the archaic warning 'Woe to you'...but its biblical sense is still very much part of contemporary culture.

'Woe to you who are racist, sexist, homophobic'...I have never understood, have you, why we expect the BBC or any other institution to be impartial on these issues? St Paul and St Luke would expect us to take sides and be passionate about what matters for our God-given human flourishing - valuing and accepting our differences, and saying sorry when we mess up. We have to discern what could well be a scam or what most likely is propaganda and steer a different course and a different outcome. Our Christian faith does not allow us to sit on the fence. But the Beatitudes help us to jump off that fence.

I remember being surprised (but I shouldn't have been) by a former colleague whose background was in the Salvation Army before his ordination. On retirement he took up and enjoyed a degree with the Open University and I learnt much later, would spend many hours a week writing on behalf of Amnesty International: to different prisoners, as well as

different corrupt government departments, across the world. Pastoral care can and did work hand in glove with direct calls for political change and justice. It was all done, I discovered, very much in secret. He didn't go campaigning around the Parish getting everyone to sign up with Amnesty, but he could have done. No, it was very much an altogether quieter and more reflective response to all the warring headlines. He showed that admirable gift of self-understanding: that the Gospel of good news is for everyone which can bring about the best kind of change and transformation, by just one person's efforts.

And then, just last week, I heard from another colleague who went to do a 4-month 'locum' in Algiers over two years ago, and he has got stuck there. Their own Bishop was even refused entry back in to the country. It is partly pandemic and partly our old friend 'oppression' against the Christian faith and way of life. We sometimes forget the real stresses and risks which are out there and this is why we can never be complacent. But it remains absolutely true and at the core of Christ's teaching: "Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh." In other words, only God can turn things around so dramatically, by the gift of His anointing Spirit.

In your prayers next Thursday, please remember Archbishop Janani Luwum of Uganda, whose anniversary of martyrdom it is, and in so doing, give thanks for all the martyrs and saints whose sacrifice was not in vain. Their fight against the darkness of this world has been won and now they rejoice

with all the angels of heaven and the loud, echoing trumpet sounds, of eternal glory. AMEN.