

## TRINITY 18

There is a lot of violence and killing in today's Gospel narrative. It is a parable, yes, but if you are like me, you might struggle to come to terms with the landowner who is such an oppressive figure. Not content with building a fence around his vineyard, he also builds a watch tower for his 'private' harvest store; in my mind it is reminiscent of a concentration camp or an 'open prison' where its inmates are forced labour hands only, with all their rights and freedom removed.

So from today's choice of readings I would prefer to pick our first one from Paul's letter to the people of Philippi. But even there, I struggle with the emotive language of a convert! Nearly every sentence begins with 'I'...

"I have come to regard...I have suffered...I want to know....I do not consider....I press on". Paul used to lock up and kill Christians in his Jewish past, any whom he believed threatened the State. So he feels guilt-ridden, ashamed as he also lets us know his 'new life in Christ' has liberated him, energized him and made him more zealous than ever.

Just look at how things are in the so-called 'Holy Land' today and how zealous nationalism seeks to control or destroy the perceived 'enemy' ...How I have longed and prayed for a 'Two-State solution' to the Israeli-Palestinian question for so many years, and now this repeated 'biblical' outburst and reliance upon violence, revenge, where only the innocent suffer and young lives cut tragically short.

We need to be wary, afraid even, of making our faith choices, our religion, a source for violence or retribution, in the name of 'justice'. Instead we need to mourn the loss of any human life and make our common 'Cry Freedom!' resound across the world. And, in the case of Libya and all the appeals for humanitarian aid, how do you help when there is no government to liaise with, against the background of a bitter civil war? I am sure that will be just one of our questions to Sir Nick Young this afternoon, whose long experience in the field working with The British Red Cross also prays, like us, for a more hope-filled future.

I may have come down hard on St Paul and I may find so much apocalyptic language more frightening than comforting, but I suspect I am not alone. Jesus did ask us to visit the sick, welcome the stranger, and show compassion to the prisoner who regrets their past failings enough to confront their crime and the victims of their crime.

This is a huge and difficult subject which I am not qualified to preach on; I can though express my thanks for those of you who are involved practically and pastorally in our two local prisons at Warren Hill and Hollesley Bay. Please do look at the special display at the west end which Alison has prepared, and do ask any of our small pastoral team, some of the difficult questions I can only touch upon here.

Looking for change in others and helping to shape it, showing compassion and mercy (instead of judgement) is, I feel sure, everything to do with being 'found by Christ' and drawing

closer to the One who is the fount of all knowledge, forgiveness and understanding. These are just some of the qualities which St Paul found too powerful to ignore so instead, his life *was* turned around, changed, transformed.

His confession, “Christ Jesus has made me his own” is also our confession as part of the body of Christ. Even though we fail, make mistakes, and hurt others, we still belong to him and we still pray that he will forgive us and make us new.

Someone I am still in touch with from my last Parish, spends a huge amount of voluntary time as a retired solicitor, offering free legal help and advice in (Category B) Lewes Prison. His great Christian work there goes under the radar of more, well-publicised ‘church work’ but it is as vital as any, not least because God has called him to that task, and he has gladly, diligently, answered it!

‘Harvesting’ is all about giving back to God and sharing the gifts and talents he has given us so freely that, together, we can flourish and grow, and let in glimpses of the divine each day:

In the name of the Father...

AMEN.