

TRINITY 15

Today's readings certainly pack a punch or two. In our own day and culture (not least the headlines aroused by Kwazi Kwarteng's so-called mini-budget) there is a disharmony, to say the least, about this current fixation on looking after the richest and ignoring the poorest in our society.

And also, in these ancient biblical texts, there is an uncompromising belief that our faith **MUST CONNECT** with the world in which we live and work, in order to bring in a kingdom of justice and equality.

So, it is as if there is this battle on two fronts at the same time. We live in such an aggressively secular age that the Christian faith is no longer the bedrock it once was. I think of the fury of Virginia Woolf when she heard of TS Eliot's conversion to Christianity. Writing to her sister, she wrote in a shocked tone that Eliot "believes in God and immortality and goes to Church...I mean there's something obscene in a living person sitting by the fire and believing in God". I think too of famous atheists like Peter Hitchens and Richard Dawkins and people like them, who believe themselves too clever to believe.

And then we have this battle of challenging those who, in this life, only store up their treasures in hedge funds or tax-free retreats because their Gospel is only to hoard and protect what they believe to be 'theirs alone'. Look closely again at John Bell's radical message from Iona in the words of our gradual hymn today... "Heav'n shall not wait for the rich to share their fortunes, the proud to fall, the elite to tend the least: Jesus is Lord; he has shown the masters' privilege – to kneel and wash servants' feet before they feast."

Abraham's chilling words to the rich man in Hades about those who neither believe in God nor in the gifts of sharing their wealth generously, is an ironic reference to the resurrection of Christ:

“If they do not listen to Moses and the prophets, neither will they be convinced even if someone rises from the dead.” So, the rich man’s understanding comes too late.

As people of faith, we do have the prophets and word of God and, our church communities – all pointing us to the way of truth and life. We do have local food banks, debt relief agencies, the church urban fund and so many others working tirelessly to bring good news to the poor; and so often, in a ‘un-preachy’ way. Our Diocese is encouraging us to provide so-called ‘warm rooms’ this winter and sharing our church halls with others, sharing our facilities, resources and outreach as best we can. Compassion and unconditional love and, yes, practical help like hot soup lunches, speak volumes of the resolute, often ‘hidden’ work of so many, of our church communities and volunteers. It is all about linking what we have heard in the Gospel proclamation with the Christian action and encouragement that can follow. It is all about being a servant. It is all about helping to bring dignity to human values and human living, instead of economic competition, in which only the most ruthless or privileged pretend to stay on top or, pretend to be, in control.

You will think of other literary ‘champions’ to steer us in a better direction, like Charles Dickens. In ‘A Christmas Carol’ he allows Ebenezer Scrooge to benefit from advice from beyond the grave. The ghost of Jacob Marley is the first to instigate his change of heart. Perhaps Dickens had some sympathy with the viewpoint of the rich man in today’s Gospel. The encounter works for Scrooge and, reformed, he is convinced of the value of compassion, and understands that earthly wealth is of no use unless you share it. It not only changes his ultimate destination, but also transforms his life. Scrooge lets go of his cares and discovers a wonderful, unselfconscious joy. Perhaps we should let Dickens take on Virginia Woolf and, instead, be bolder in living out the Gospel’s call in our own age even if we, sometimes, doubt ourselves? Take heart!