

3rd Before Lent

I am sure you remember those exam or essay questions which began, 'Compare and contrast...' Happy days, or not?

It usually concerned our interpretation of different styles of writing, or speaking, or thinking – possibly all three. With our New Testament reading and separate Gospel one today, I tend to do this almost unconsciously.

If you close your eyes for the Liturgy of the Word (and you are allowed to), you could probably guess that St Paul was the author of our first reading? He has a kind of internal discussion with himself, sometimes it is tortuous or at least, complex. He weighs everything up carefully and closely and often thinks and speaks like an academic: 'On the one hand, and on the other...' But he also seems to be very clever at picking his arguments. Like the best politician or lawyer, he hears people's concerns and worries (in this case whether we can believe in Christ's resurrection), weighs up the evidence, and almost seems to show off at the end, throwing down his papers in front of the jury as if to say, 'So there you have it, "Christ **has** been raised from the dead". "I rest my case M' Lord".

I think St Paul would have loved the TV in his courtroom, don't you? As well as being a great writer, he was a great orator. And I suspect he didn't suffer fools gladly any more than he would be impressed with the current state of play of the leadership in the Church of England right now; all the in-fighting, the many failures in safeguarding, you name it! Liz

keeps telling me there has been a 'people's poll' at who should be the next Archbishop of Canterbury and high up the list, apparently, is Sir Cliff Richard and Sir Gareth Southgate! Can you imagine?! When people ask me...I say it would be good to have someone like the former Dean of Canterbury (but he is in heaven) or why not, a wise and prayerful Parish priest somewhere, to at least surprise and shock those Bishops who think they are first in line? You can see why I have never been 'promoted'!

I can almost hear St Paul whispering in our ears... 'But we are all Apostles, aren't we?' Yes, we are. And we have to stand up for our faith sometimes, speak out, and be counted. This year's Lent course will help us all to rediscover the hard-won beliefs and principles of the Nicene Creed, as well as how we apply its meaning, unfold and articulate its treasures: for the everyday, for you and me. It is good to do this again in our own homes this year and share the kind of fellowship that big Sunday gatherings, can't.

Which leads me to say a word about the Gospel. Its open-air scene is in contrast to St Paul's 'interior' reasoning. There are huge crowds following Jesus and wanting to catch something he is saying. Many years ago, I recall the Monty Python team suggesting that it would have been impossible to hear Jesus teaching, with so many people present. Was it John Cleese who exclaimed, 'Blessed are the Cheesemakers'? as if to drive the point home that it was like being in the O2 arena but without any sound system! So thank God, for St Luke, that like the best doctor, he wrote down and recorded the

Beatitudes in such a formal and meticulous way. It is still very hard for us to hear because the message is so radical. Like the 'Magnificat', everything is turned upside down: 'Blessed are the poor, the hungry, the sorrowful, the downtrodden...'

These are the people Christ claims as his own and these are the people who instinctively know what the kingdom of heaven will look like. Compare and contrast our hunger for truth, and justice with the world's greed for oppressive power and 'control' over others.

The Beatitudes, then, were an 'event' in public hearing which turned into a text for us: 'to read, mark, learn and inwardly digest'. Rabbi Jonathan Sacks interpreted them as a lesson in happiness. He said this:

"Happiness is the ability to look back on a life and say: I lived for certain values. I acted on them and was willing to make sacrifices for them. I was part of a family, embracing it and being embraced in return. I was a good neighbour, ready to help when help was needed. I was part of a community honouring its traditions, participating in its life, sharing its obligations. It is these things that make up happiness in this uncertain world. Taken together, they make us see what is at risk in our present culture. No one ever asked me to say of someone that they dressed well, lived extravagantly, took fabulous holidays, drove an expensive car or had a good time. I never heard anyone praised for being too busy at work to find time for their children."

So, the bets are on, dear friends, for a new Rabbi to be the next Archbishop! Or at the very least, someone who can speak to and inspire: our hearts and minds, and souls. AMEN.