

Sermon, Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost

St Mark's, Brookton, & St Mary's Beverley

Readings: Proverbs 1:20-33; Psalm 19; James 2:18-26; Mark 8:27-38.

Hymns: Morning has broken; Brother, Sister let me serve you; I am the bread of life/ Make me a channel of your peace; Lord of all hopefulness

Earlier this week I attended the Annual Awards Night Dinner of the Western Australian Branch of the Australian Association of Religious Educators (AARE) in Perth. I was there as one of the Award recipients, having been kindly and unexpectedly nominated for a Certificate of Meritorious Service by my colleagues in Religion, Philosophy & Ethics, and Chaplaincy at Guildford Grammar School. It was a lovely occasion, and to have the Association's membership approve my nomination was both an honour, and humbling. What was even more humbling was to be part of a group of awardees whose range of ministry and service, be at primary or secondary schools, Government, Catholic or Independent schools, spoke glowingly to a commitment to the Faith through service, prayer, worship, and social justice, or as St James would proclaim, Faith completed by works.

As we reflect upon our readings from Proverbs, St James, and St Mark, this morning we are reminded of our need to be listening to, and acting upon our knowledge of, God and Jesus Christ, and what is required of us. The Proverbs' passage is quite strident, reminding us that to ignore the call of God is to hate true knowledge, and not to fear the Lord. May I suggest this is not as it could seem an invitation to a smug self-righteousness (I'm fine, stuff you), but in the light of our other readings today, it is a call for us to spread this Good News, and to invite others to know the life-affirming hope, peace, and love of God.

The Faith/Works dichotomy and debate can be ongoing and has centred to some extent on what were the excesses of the Mediaeval Church, when it acted much more as a temporal authority than one with spiritual leadership; and of course, upon St Paul's assertion that Salvation comes through Faith alone. That is a fine aphorism, but what does it mean in the reality of our lives; Christ tells us to love our neighbours as ourselves, but what does that mean in the reality of our lives, especially if those with whom we work and live are ardently antagonistic to our understandings. In this regard we often witness a growing petulance on the part of some people who wish to exclude the Church

and religion from the “Public Square”, as if everyone was not interested, and that everyone was agreed on this, and everything else in life. It certainly holds to no logic in a society which would contend it is pluralistic and multicultural – surely Christianity is a large part of that plurality and the diversity of cultures?

St James, whom we do well to remember was Jesus’ brother, and a leader of the Church in Jerusalem after Pentecost, would have had firsthand and real experience of Jesus in action – the healing, the teaching, the good works! Thus, it does not seem strange to me that for St James real Faith involves real action, real works of God’s love, Hope, Peace, Justice and Wisdom. It is a strong analogy he uses of the body without the spirit being dead; thus, Faith apart from works is dead!

In the passage from St Mark, we have that wonderful moment of revelation for the disciples, and not least St Peter, that Jesus was the Christ, the Messiah, the Son of God; not simply a great leader or prophet, someone far greater. Nonetheless, we note that they didn’t fully realise what that meant. As with us all, they had much to learn and understand. Jesus also reminds them that they are not to be ashamed of him; indeed, disciples such as ourselves are told that, if need be, we need give up our life for him.

While I have not been giving up my life, I can report that as part of many visits to all kinds of places in the Shires of Beverley, Brookton, Quairading and York, I have included the bars and lounges of all pubs! I am only too aware if you turn up there, dressed in clerical clothes as I do, you stand a good chance of being the butt of some banter or criticism. Of course, I have received a little of it – one man provocatively told me he ate with the Devil; when I replied, “Did you have salad?” he seemed a little dumbfounded! I think he had been after a rise. Some patrons, for all intents and purposes, ignored me, or spoke about the weather (I’ve lived in England, so I have mastered that skill!) while others were open to conversation and asked thoughtful and enquiring questions. Some even bought me a drink!

Similarly, I was reminded at the AARE Award night that not being ashamed for Christ can be bountiful in bringing Good News to others, helping to build up an even greater Kingdom of God, and that irrespective of where some people might be in their Faith journey, we can know that we are doing God’s work, and praise God, the reaping in Faithfulness of others will take place sometime in God’s great plan.