

### **Holy Trinity, Funchal, 28 February 2016, Lent 3.**

Isaiah 55<sup>1-9</sup>, 1 Corinthians 10<sup>1-13</sup>, Luke 13<sup>1-9</sup>

It sometimes feels to be a bit of a puzzle, and you may be thinking that now, wondering why the Bible passages we have just read were chosen together for this particular day, and what it was felt they are saying to us. There is just one clue to that, in small red print on the notice-board outside, but probably most of us haven't seen it. It says – “I tell you, but unless you repent, you will all perish”. Or we could take an image from the world of radar or navigation, and think of these three passages as providing bearings, from different angles. Three reliable bearings can give good-quality information that's not otherwise available, and these are from probably the three top sources in the Bible, the major prophet Isaiah, 700 years before Jesus, the major New Testament writer Paul, the first apostle who only knew the risen Jesus, and Jesus himself. So it should be interesting to see what their three different bearings may be pointing towards.

And there's a fourth, equally reliable if we've got it in good condition, as part of the same process: that is, for each of us, our sense of where we are now, with the thoughts and issues and concerns that we have brought with us here this morning. Whether it is a normal Sunday, or an occasional holiday, or one of life's major turning-points, we are taking time out, hopefully to be refreshed and nourished, to clarify our perspectives and sense of direction, to take stock, make adjustments, and find some renewal and encouragement for what lies ahead.

Something I read the other day, I guess most of us would agree with easily. It is different being a Christian in society today from how it used to be. Up to a generation or so ago, a Christian was a member of the majority community. Working on the archives of the church here, as I am doing, that comes over strongly from much of the past 200 years. Especially for expatriates, being English and being Church of England seemed to be thought just about the same thing. To say that the Church of England was the Conservative party at prayer was a jibe that stuck for a long time. Most people would tick the box saying they were members of a major Christian denomination. Church-going was normal, up to about 22% of the population in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, I read this week. Many people, and I guess many of us here, let that culture become the seedbed for authentic first-hand Christian character and living; but very many more did not, and today that is the majority called 'nones'. To be a Christian now is to be a member of a minority, likely to be challenged, and Christian identity and values are by no means as readily welcomed or in place underpinning the way society does things. I think there is a growing awareness and concern about the resulting spiritual hunger and emptiness, in our politics and leadership, in the economy and the society we are creating for our young people, in how issues like migration, social justice and the future of the planet are addressed, and how wisely in the UK we shall handle the vitally important debate in the weeks ahead about the EU, to name just a few of the most obvious areas for which society really needs a secure and trusted world-view and moral base. The phrase “Unless you repent you will all perish” may not be all that far-fetched.

In St Paul's time the Christian faith, being new, was learning its role in a similar environment. He had three powerful images of what it was like to be a Christian. He said it was like being an athlete, a top

professional in one's vocation, and a soldier: focused; taking seriously the challenge of the race, the task or the opposition; trained, and continuously improving one's understanding and skills; motivated, stimulated, fit, up to date. Most of us will have first-hand experience of being in those or similar roles, and I guess can recall something of the buzz of what at best it is like to be in situations where those are the qualities needed, and which we expect to receive, develop and use. That is something like what it takes to be a Christian and a member of the church today, a far cry from the out-dated easy-going, drifting along with crowd.

The athlete, the worker and the soldier are all rather macho examples, and of course there is another, even more graphic and familiar, where St Paul develops the idea of the soldier putting on and expertly using what he calls the whole armour of God, the qualities that are the equipment for Christian living.

In the bearings we are taking today, those three Bible passages to mix with our personal perspectives, there is a comparable list to be used in a similar way, but rather more like a foundation course, for whatever direction one's life may take. So the image now is of someone, probably young (like our teenage grand-daughter, I can't help thinking), and the foundations he or she is acquiring for the kind of adult they are going to be. Let's take a look at what between them Isaiah, St Paul and Jesus are saying to someone, including ourselves, in that sort of position.

First, in the words of Jesus, comes a negative message. The athlete or the soldier is going to be told to start by losing excess weight or baggage. Jesus here and elsewhere in the gospels is clear and forthright about a piece of baggage most of us naturally carry that he says is unhelpful – the expectation that life will be, or should be, based on a strict system of rewards and punishments. Faced with adversity, we naturally ask why? why me? why that person? what is that a punishment for? “Why doesn't God do what I think he should do?” Or, if things are going well, like Maria in *The Sound of Music*, “I must have done something good”. Jesus says, “No. That isn't God, it is an idol invented by human nature and occupying the place in human life meant for God.” If God was like that, people would be more like slaves or instruments, and God never treats us like that. Jesus says “Don't base your life on that type of thinking. God offers something better: make room for it”.

Immediately, the contents of today's passage from Isaiah more than fill that space: - The God who does exist is one who creates in love and generosity, which are independent of and totally beyond any consideration of what we deserve. Make room to relate to God who says my ways are higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts – obvious when we contemplate God in the whole of creation. Whoever you are and whatever state you are in, I will nourish your soul, your life comes from me, you exist because of my love, and what you can know of me is totally reliable. This is meant to be what all people know, just as the whole world of the natural creation knows it. It is given as the bedrock of being human.

Another dimension, not mentioned so far, comes in to link this specifically with the ministry of Jesus. Today we aren't just listening to the Bible passages, or just adding to that the rather more active and personal interweaving of our own present experiences and concerns. It becomes more interactive still – though more real than pressing the red button on the TV – and over a longer period when we realise that

we are in the middle of Lent, when each year Christians get into step for a period of weeks with the events in Jesus' life which led to his suffering and death, where he identifies with and enters into all suffering and death, human and in all creation, and through that to his resurrection where he comes out on the other side, and to his ascension following which the risen Jesus is present to every human being in the best possible personal relationship. That was the experience which the first disciples proved to be true, which transformed them, and has been offered to and experienced by people ever since.

So these bearings point to the absolutely solid reliability at the heart of the Christian faith and reaffirmed so often in the Bible and Christian experience. They also point to a collection of supportive material about the full adult maturity that God intends for human life based on these foundations. Human beings are given authority and creativity. That does carry responsibility, accountability, and consequences. That authority and independence are meant to be exercised under God, in a much more grown-up relationship than ever we naturally expect, and at its heart our relationship with the risen Jesus. It includes accepting our own vulnerability, limitations, and awareness of risk, not cocksure but confident that we shall be resourced in line with our needs. Take every opportunity to meet with God – these can come unexpectedly and from outside our own control. Remember that strange little parable of Jesus at the end of our gospel reading about the fig tree and the gardener. There are second chances, opportunities to recover, and God doesn't give up on us. Sometimes it is the gardener, not the owner, who calls the shots – it can sometimes seem as if God says – yes, we'll do as you say, you take the moral high ground, the risk, the consequences, the credit. I'll back you.

There's an overall term for the qualities this relationship with God is meant to add up to – the term with many aspects and uses, which comes from deep in the Old Testament and other ancient sources. Wisdom. Wisdom is what King Solomon asked God for in a splendid prayer we could all do well to re-write for ourselves. There is Wisdom the feminine personality of God joyfully active at the centre of all creation, learning, art, science and technology: the role taken up by Jesus, described throughout the New Testament as the Wisdom of God, and our companion now. Wisdom, the collection of qualities God wants to give men and women to make them at their best for living, as individuals, in society, and as part of the whole of creation. And Wisdom as traditionally associated in many societies with people of the sort of age of some of us here. There are more of us than ever before, we are among the richest and most fortunate people who have ever lived, a far cry from the 12 inexperienced men who started it all. Ought we to be thinking that humanity has access to the wisdom required for the unprecedented demands and challenges of our times ? There's no doubt about the answer the Christian faith gives to that. Worth pondering, I hope you think.

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