

April 29, 1918 Sermon

In the name of Almighty God, Father Son and Holy Spirit. Amen

I woke up this morning at 5.15 am listened to the dawn Chorus – I was warm and comfortable in my bed. The sky was grey and dull. Went into prayer mode – thinking of course led to prayer. I gave thanks for my comfortable home – my friends and family. Gave thanks to God for all he had done for me – for his son who died on Calvary to save me from my sin. Who brings new hope and new life into the world.

Then I remembered the folk in Syria and Iraq – My friend the Vicar of Baghdad Andrew White who could no longer return to the city that he loves – but is now exiled in Jerusalem. He had seen members of his congregation beheaded. I prayed for them too- Nevertheless prayers are only weasel words if not accompanied by protest and by practical aid. I thought how fortunate I was to have been born in a Christian country. Then I reread the lesson for this morning.

The image of the vine in the bible is very evocative. It was a symbol of life. The Israelites were called the people of the vine. They saw themselves as the vineyard of the Lord – and the prophets show that, from time to time – sadly – God had very little joy in the vineyard. He repeatedly called his people to return to the earth – to get busy and bear good fruit in this world again.

The image was so strong where the Jews were concerned that, in the two years they revolted against Rome (from AD69 – AD70) they minted their own coins – showing not the head of Caesar but a vine – a symbol of a vigorous new life.

Repeatedly Israel forgot that the Lord had planted them as a nation to bear good fruits for him. They did not exist for themselves but for the stranger in their midst.

As Isaiah records “The Lord said ‘When I looked to you to bear grapes why did you yield wild grapes?’ As Jeremiah records “God says ‘I planted a choice vine wholly of pure seed then why have you turned degenerate and become wild again?’

He threatens the nation with an axe. Here we are presented with a marvellous picture – the axe strikes at the root of the vine and new branches grow from the stump.

His name is – of course – Jesus and his followers are the branches fed by him – sharing a common life with him. The gift of God – they draw their strength from the true vine.

Our reading from the Gospel according to Saint John makes clear that – in the past God called the nation to his aid – theirs was a collective responsibility – with the coming of Jesus folk are called as individuals. Called to bear fruit - the fruit of the Holy Spirit. To abide in Christ as he will abide in them. Whoever does not receive and accept God’s will fail – as branches that are pruned and thrown into a fire. We can do nothing without his help. As God has loved Jesus so he loves us. His love is not for us alone. Warmed and strengthened we have work to do using whatever unique talents we possess.

Christian society is not going to arrive unless we really want it; and we are not going to really want it until we are fully Christian. I may repeat ‘Do as you would be done by ‘until I am blue in the face but I cannot really carry it out until I love my neighbour as myself and I learn to love God.

I cannot learn to love God except by learning to obey him.

Jesus still says 'I am the vine and you are the branches' the stress here is on life divine – we live his life to the full. Chosen, called and precious we belong to him and he belongs to us.

This needs to be affirmed constantly from our side. We have to be constantly saying 'Yes' to him. That is why we are here this morning. To be a community of his love. At one with God. The disciples had to be reminded to live in Christ and so do we.

First a litmus test concerning how real and deep your personal communion with Jesus? How deep and real is your personal commitment with your neighbour, with your brothers and sisters?

This chapter contains the divine command "Love one another as I have loved you". To be a disciple of Jesus Christ only happens when you have really grasped what Easter love really is. When you have asked God to enter into your heart and change you forever. We all demand that change happens for the better. However, we do not wish to be changed ourselves: whether as a Church or a nation.

This takes us from Jesus to ourselves – from ourselves to this sad world of ours, called to be Christ-like – to re-present Christ to a weary world.

Saint Augustus wrote "Give me someone who loves and he will understand what I am trying to say – give me someone whose heart yearns – who is hungry and who feels the nostalgia of loneliness in this exile – give me someone who is hungry and thirsty and sighs for the coming of the kingdom of God – give me such a one and he will understand what I am trying to say – but, if I must explain myself to ice-cold indifference he will not understand."

Does your heart yearn for the coming of God's kingdom?

I know that my heart longs to see a weary world set free. Free from indifference to God – from fear and hatred – from terrorism – from depression – from exploitation of the world's resources – from abusive relationships – from drug trafficking – from child labour.

I pray for the sharing of human resources – for the reaching out of the rich and powerful nations to the poorest on earth. For folk to be truthful and honest with no exception. For the comforting of the lost and lonely – the sick and the dying and that – distrust, prejudice, betrayal and injustice be a thing of the past.

Beloved let us love for love is from God – and we are the people of God. He is the vine and we are the branches.

We are, and must remain a welcoming, caring, sharing community of Christ. Amen

M. Herbert