

Trinity 7B 18/07/2021

After settling on the title for this sermon, I “googled” the phrase “good for what ails you” on the internet. My search resulted in quite an interesting list of old and new products and activities that were or are supposedly good for what ails us. There were a couple of sites online that promoted humour as a good remedy for just about anything bad. Another site featured a jazz song with the lyric, “love is good for anything that ails you.” It’s hard to argue with that one!

According to the world wide web, Siberian ginseng and Yemeni honey are really good for you, as well as massage therapy, owning a pet, and aromatherapy. My favourite, though, among all of the old creams, salves, and liniments used a century ago was this one: Brame’s Pain Knocker. The ingredients? 1.5% tincture of opium, 1.5% chloroform, and 88% alcohol content! Wow! Now there’s a cure for what ails you! Seriously, what does ail us? What ails the world?

The gospel reading tells us Jesus went out to the towns and villages, teaching, preaching, and healing every kind of disease and sickness. But beyond the physical ailments he also noticed that the crowds were harassed, confused, and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. Scripture tells us that we are, in fact, being stalked and attacked in this life by the predator of all predators - the devil, who is compared to a roaring lion, prowling around to find someone to attack and devour (1 Peter 5:8). The beautiful prayer time we call Compline in the Anglican Church to be said each night before sleep reminds us- here are some of the words from this simple ancient liturgy:

*Before the ending of the day,
Creator of the world, we pray
That you, with steadfast love, would keep
Your watch around us while we sleep.
From evil dreams defend our sight,
From fears and terrors of the night;
Tread underfoot our deadly foe
That we no sinful thought may know.
O Father, that we ask be done
Through Jesus Christ, your only Son;
And Holy Spirit, by whose breath
Our souls are raised to life from death.*

Be sober, be vigilant, because your adversary the devil is prowling round like a roaring lion, seeking for someone to devour. Resist him, strong in the faith.

The Lord almighty grant us a quiet night and a perfect end.

Harassed, helpless, and confused: sounds like symptoms that fit our time and world, don’t they? So many people feel harassed and helpless, locked into jobs and work loads that enslave and control rather than bring satisfaction and contentment. The *dis-ease* we experience at work or in our mismanagement of time then affects negatively all of our most important relationships, including the relationship with God. Our despondency fuelled by another lockdown. And when that happens, the devil roars with delight. In this post-modern world where everything is presented as being relative, where all values are neutral, and where no absolute truth can supposedly be known with any certainty, confusion and instability reign supreme. We run helter-skelter, looking for a quick fix from

one self-help guru with a new, *old* idea, to the next. But we never find lasting peace and wholeness and a solid place upon which to build our lives and our future. Satan sees it all and purrs with contentment at our confusion.

Everywhere we turn we are confronted with a society and lives full of physical, emotional, social, and spiritual sickness. How do we respond? What effect does the crowd have on us? Does its frenzied panic suck us in? Does its weary resignation fill us with fear or loathing? Or does the sight of the crowd, harassed and helpless like sheep without a shepherd, fill us with compassion, as it did Jesus?

Let's be clear about this: Jesus wasn't just "sorry" for the crowd. No, the Greek word used here in verse 34 - *splangnistheis* - means that Jesus was filled with a gut-wrenching compassion, a compassion that reached out in words and deeds. This gut-wrenching compassion would lead Jesus to the cross to die for the crowd, for the world, for you, for me, while we were yet helpless and harassed, confused and lost enemies of God.

That pastoral care of Jesus is at the very heart of our Anglican Church- we are known for it. The church, if it is to be the church, must be all about that kind of mission. Mission is the very DNA of the church, not an add on or only done when all other things are done and done by the few, but first and foremost by all - first and foremost by all. Perhaps the greatest, most famous Christian theologian of the last century, a Swiss Reformed Christian named Karl Barth, has written: "The church is either a missionary church or no church at all". (1)

I think what that means for us at Holy Trinity Kew is that we engage well, but we find it hard to know how to take the next step. I suspect that is because we do the things which are easy. It is easy to engage people, and show our friendliness, and even serve them sacrificially, but a lot more difficult to have conversations about faith, and calling people to commitment to Jesus...

This means that if our mission is to "get people to come to church", a sort of "ANGLICAN LITE" then we will fail spectacularly. The world is secular and will never develop an interest in religious observance. It just isn't going to happen to anyone with a secular mindset – and that means anyone born after 1970. But if we consider our mission is "introducing people to Jesus", or "helping people to follow Jesus" from the great depths of our unique tradition then we might just stand a chance.

We must not be surprised that in "getting people to come to church" and only leaving it at that- that it will take very little for them to leave again over the smallest of reasons, from church times clashing with coffee time with friends in High St, to shopping at Bunnings, to looking after the grandchildren, to leaving over petty differences with other members of the congregation, the way the choir performs, something the Vicar apparently said or did- or a loss of power- no longer leveraged by their participation. The dumbing down of our tradition to meet the lowest common denominator.

Being proud of our faith and tradition and "getting people to come to church" may be the first step, but its only the first step; unless we are in the business of making disciples, who commit to Our Lord and this Church unconditionally we are always in severe peril of decline- to the point where we dare do nothing as a church in case we offend a group who have a casual and at bottom-conditional, uncommitted attendance and support. Paralysis, inaction and precarious but inevitable decline will be our future.

Jesus came with the remedy for what ails the world, what ails Kew, and what ails Holy Trinity - the good news of the reign of God's love, come to earth in him. The love of God has broken into our world in a radically new and paradoxically powerful way, bringing life, health, wholeness, and cleansing through the forgiveness of sins. Part of the paradox of the good news is that Jesus' followers - formerly harassed and panicked sheep without a shepherd themselves - are integral to God's remedy. We who have been marked with the cross of Christ forever in the waters of baptism, are claimed, gathered, and sent by God's goodness for the sake of the world because "the harvest is plentiful, but the labourers are few" (Matthew 9:37b). The harvest is indeed plentiful.

The compassion of Christ compels us to reach out to our wider community and, perhaps, be the means by which God's Spirit leads them back into the fold; not by "getting people to come to church" solely, but back into the body of believers and being one of those who follow Jesus unconditionally. The harvest is plentiful. There are harassed and helpless people out there, around the corner from where we live, working in the same office, in the next cubicle to ours, living across the street, right next door - perhaps even in the same house with us. They are lost sheep without a shepherd, and some, sadly not all, but some right now are ready to respond to the good news.

Who is caring for them? Who will have compassion on them? The harvest is plentiful - it is the labourers who are few. That is why Jesus told his disciples then and tells us today to pray to the Lord of the harvest to send out labourers to bring in the harvest. Prayer is the first step; it is not a substitute for work, but the work will not be done without prayer. So we pray and work. Notice, immediately after Jesus tells his disciples to pray that God would send out labourers into the harvest, he sends those whom he asked to pray, out, as the answer to that prayer. There's simply no escaping it: like the disciples before us, we are an integral part of God's remedy for what ails the world.

Ordinary people like you and me are called by God for his extraordinary work in the world. Jesus' ministry is also ours: to do no harm, but to embody in our words and actions and attitudes God's remedy that is good for what ails the world. Where there is brokenness, we will bring reconciliation through the amazing power of the forgiveness of sins, revealed at the cross of Christ. When people feel excluded and ostracised, we will bring the cleansing touch of inclusion and welcome in Jesus' name. Where life is overshadowed by the fear of death, we will bring hope by proclaiming Christ's resurrection. Wherever we find evil at work, whether at home, in the church, at school, at work, in society in general or whether half-way around the globe, we will oppose it with all our might in Jesus' name. His gut-wrenching compassion compels us so that others may be freed from bondage to falsehood and injustice. The compassion of the Triune God compels us so that the harassed and helpless of this world might come to know Jesus as we have come to know him: God's very personal remedy for what ails the world. Amen

Fr Robert Newton

1. Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, Vol. III, ed. G. W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1976), p. 64.