

St Nicolas Cranleigh 10am Parish Communion

Sunday 17th October 2021 (Trinity 20)

Readings: Heb. 5:1-10 and Mark 10:35-45

A quick glance at the internet, or a trawl through the national papers will remind you that all over the world, bad stuff happens! Even the local papers, serving just this small area of South-east Surrey, will be full of all the latest bad things that have happened. And here in the parish, we have been so recently 'rocked' by the news of the tragic death of Roy Hislop in a hit and run accident just a mile from where most of us live!

So, I sometimes find myself wondering about God and Jesus and heaven, and asking what difference that all makes?

When Jesus died on the cross and rose again to new life, the theological understanding, which is heard again and again in many of our hymns, is that he conquered sin and death. Or, in the words of today's reading, that *"he came to give his life as a ransom for many."*

My understanding of that has always been that he gave his life for all of us - all humanity, past, present and future. But what has changed? Sin and death are still rampant in our society some 2000 years later, and the situation in the Middle East, in Jesus' own homeland, gets no better, and we realise that all that violence is perpetrated in the name of religion.

And so often we are told that the purpose of the violence is to combat evil, or at least to limit its power. The argument may go, for instance, that the evil of Hitler could not have been stopped without resorting to the violence of war.

Mahatma Gandhi took a different view, and perhaps took non-violent protest further than anyone else and achieved a great deal for his people through it, but in the end, even he was destroyed by violence and after his death, his movement soon faltered.

For us humans, the choices so often seem to be either to let the bullies get away with it, or to take up arms and fight!

However, when Peter drew his sword in the Garden of Gethsemane in order to challenge those who came to arrest Jesus, he was told very sharply by Jesus to put away his weapon. And Jesus himself allowed the bullies to do what they would with him. He allowed himself to be executed in the most hideous way without even verbally protesting his innocence.

And yet something about the way he faced his death, caused even the Roman centurion who crucified him to exclaim, "*Truly this man was the son of God.*" So, in that respect Jesus conquered death, in that even though he must have been terrified and in agony, he didn't allow that fear and that pain to distort his judgement. He was able to stick to his principles without faltering, and even the fear of death couldn't shift him from his chosen course.

The problem is, that we spend too much time looking at things through human eyes, and aren't able to see life from God's perspective. This was the trouble with James and John, Zebedee's sons. They applied their very human experience to what they imagined heaven must be like, and they asked to sit on the top table.

Not such a strange request when you remember that Robert Maxwell, the disgraced newspaper tycoon who died way back in 1991, made sure

he was buried in the right place, on the Mount of Olives, in order to be in the front rank at the resurrection at the end of time.

And I'm reminded too, of the many arguments that used to take place in our house, when the girls were small, about who's going to sit next to who, and why! It's a very human thing to want the best seat in the house!

James and John were unable to understand that human rules and human ways don't apply in God's kingdom, where there is no beginning and no end, no first and no last.

Jesus tried to explain to them in words of one syllable. He tried to get them to look ahead, to look more realistically at the sort of thing they were requesting. But they still couldn't grasp it. When Jesus said: "*Can you drink the cup that I drink, or be baptised with my kind of baptism?*" they took it all completely literally, shook their heads in bewilderment and said, "*Yes, of course we can!*"

James and John didn't have the benefit of hindsight which we have. They didn't know that Jesus was going to come to a terrible end. They had no idea about the sort of commitment through intense fear and pain and struggle which God would demand of them. The request they made showed their naivety and lack of understanding.

But they were caught in the same trap that waits for us today. They looked at their situation through human eyes, because they only had human eyes with which to look. Just as we only have human eyes with which to look at our human situations.

We can put our situations directly into God's hands and then wait and listen and follow his guidance. But we can't predict in advance what he

will tell us to do. For instance, there may be occasions when the best way to combat evil is to silently face it, just as Jesus silently faced it. But there may be other occasions when we need to use force to restrain the damaging activities of national or international bullies.

Being a Christian is a dangerous and risky way of life. It means acknowledging that God's thoughts are not our thoughts and that God's ways are not our ways. And then it means living by that acknowledgement and waiting upon God. It means learning to intuitively pick up what we believe he is asking of us, risking that we may not necessarily have it right, but trusting God and stepping forward in faith anyway, even when the requests God seems to be making appear strange and ridiculous.

And through all that we'll probably discover that priorities change, so that those things which had first place in our lives drop down the list while those things which were right at the bottom rise to the top of the list.

This is a radical way of trusting God because it means leaving ourselves and our rational senses behind.

But to live life with God in this way also means that we'll begin to understand for ourselves how Jesus conquered death and sin, because we'll discover in our own lives that God really is in charge. And when that happens, fears melt away, inner strength grows, and all our understandings change!

And most importantly of all, when the bad stuff happens, we can deal with it in the knowledge that Christ has been there before us, and that what he did all those years ago actually does make a difference, as we deal with it today!