

**Sunday 28<sup>th</sup> June 2020**  
**3rd Sunday after Trinity (A)**

**Liverpool Parish Church**

**[OT: Jeremiah 28.5-9]**  
**[NT: Romans 6.12-end]**  
**G: Matthew 10.40-end**

‘Whoever welcomes a prophet in the name of a prophet shall receive a prophet’s reward’

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

I have some good news for those of you of a fragile disposition- this is the last time you will have to regard the unfortunate fusion of brown fur and pink blancmange that I present as a face at quite such close digital quarters. Next week, whilst we will still be filming, a live stream no less, as we know not everyone will be able to join us back in church immediately, I, and the rest of the clergy will be at a bit more of a distance. The return to public worship necessarily throws up a number of questions- most of these are practical ones, of course, about how to rearrange chairs and marshal people’s entries and exits and ensure that hand sanitiser runs down like waters and liquid soap like a mighty stream. However, it is the vocation of the clergy- indeed I would put it to you that it is the calling of all Christians- to think also of that which is greater than the practical, which goes beyond the purely logistic or physical aspects of returning unto the temple of God.

The question that, I suppose, most clearly presents itself is- ‘what are we returning for?’

What is the purpose of our continued engagement with God and one another in this specific time and place? Read in a particular way- one might garner an easy answer from our gospel reading today. Therein Christ lists the rewards that lie in store for the disciples as they set out on their ministry to proclaim their faith, our faith to the world. This is a

passage beloved of exponents of the prosperity gospel- the idea that God, like a benevolent school teacher, gives us tangible rewards for good behaviour.

This, I would suggest, is an interpretation that simplifies and incorrectly diagnosis the focus of this passage and instead that this is an example of Christ demonstrating his masterful command of irony, subverting the expected and, fundamentally, pointing us to the necessity of our focus on Heaven. What precisely is the reward we are expecting? The prosperity gospel would lead us to cultivate a culture of righteousness predicated on reward in earthly terms. There are plenty of other manifestations of this pervasive idea that we earn righteousness- from Karma to the current moral fixation with 'cancelling' people- all these place the perimeters both the ideas of 'goodness' and the punishment or reward for transgressing or affirming it in our sphere. We all know how that ends- justifying hatred of other people is all the easier when we have comforting morally absolute abstracts behind us.

Aside from these worrying potential outcomes of such a moral framework, the idea that 'being a good person' is somehow all that's required- or even that reward is the sum total of what the Christian promise amounts to is fraught with a thousand theological problems. The misunderstanding of God as acting in this way is what leads us to fixations with the 'why do bad things happen to good people' in discussions of God's existence and how he engages with the world. Seeing good behaviour as equalling good reward is an impossible tenet to hold when up against the harsh realities of a fallen creation. It is also not what this passage is saying.

After all- what is a prophets reward? That's made very clear in Matthew 23, verse 37- they are stoned and killed. What is the reward of a righteous person- the tail end of the beatitudes in Matthew 5, verse 10 suggests that they are pretty much guaranteed to be persecuted. Yet this is not just Christ indulging in sub reference and wordplay- it was reality

too. All of the disciples he addresses in this passage but one died unimaginably brutal deaths for their insistence on maintaining the faith. That promised prosperity doesn't sound quite so appetising now.

What then is the point? What is the worship of God which we are returning to? It certainly is not an act that will win you the lottery or get you a promotion by way of reward—though, whilst it behoves us to bear in mind and prayer that many of our brothers and sisters in Christ will suffer the horrors of persecution this Sunday and next- it is unlikely that you will face a true 'prophet's reward' when you return to church next week. The answer to what we return to is there, alongside Christ's irony, in the Gospel.

As with so much of Scripture, this passage is rich with echoes within echoes. 'Whoever gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones in the name of a disciple- truly I tell you, none of these will lose their reward.' The echo that sounds loudest here is of one of the seven last words on the cross- Christ's own cry of 'I thirst'. Never mind a prophet's reward- the reward of God himself is the agony of crucifixion. As such, we will return to encounter the sacramental presence of that same beaten and bruised body- we will encounter a God who is not an abstract dispenser of thunderbolts or winning lottery tickets, but rather whose fearfulness and awe is found in his enthronement on the cross and his bringing of abundant life to the very tombs of death. As such, our reward is what we are called to in the first place- encounter, union, and redemption in and through and with him. For just as we find it easiest to hate when we make ourselves distant from our fellow human beings, so we will find it easiest to love when we realise that God, through Christ, has drawn to our fallen humanity to be close, so close as to be one, to him.

So- what will we be returning for? To encounter the beating heart of the universe, to hear proclaimed the tale of redemptive love for us, to be taken into the very court of Heaven by

means of the sacramental assurance and, in return, to go out and imbue our little corners of Merseyside with the reverberations of that Heavenly love. But, this is all next week- and until then we wait. Yet our return to the altar will not be a finality- indeed, we will still wait when we are there. Our worship is but seeing through a glass darkly, a life time of anticipation of our return to our truest essence, of the attaining of those heavenly joys which far outrank the earthly rewards we so often crave. Until then, we wait; but, while we do, for those of you of our shared, fragile, human disposition, I have, we *have*, some, no, *the*, Good News.

Fr Fergus Butler-Gallie