

Sunday 30th August 2020
Trinity 12 (A)

Liverpool Parish Church

OT: Jeremiah 15.15-21
NT: Romans 12.9-end
G: Matthew 16.21-end

Last week I did something which 9 times out of 10, I would bitterly regret.

Just as I was leaving work for the evening, I answered the phone. Too often that has resulted in a complex, lengthy conversation or the need to turn round, switch the computer back on and produce a piece of work which appears to mean life or death for some administrator.

But this time, it was very different. The caller was a young woman, struggling to find the words she needed to explain her predicament, unclear as to why she had alighted on our number as a possible source of help. It transpired that she had a close relative who is in the early stages of alcoholism. The stage when they are now spending a small fortune on wine or beer and moving on to spirits. The stage when their drinking has become more obvious and a source of pain and concern to those close to them. The stage when they are yet unable to admit their problem to themselves let alone their family and friends. I have very limited knowledge of alcohol services but I was, at least able to listen, and to provide some pointers to people who may have answers to assist.

When I put the phone down, I reflected that I still had on my lanyard and work ID, when the call had been far more about wearing this ID, my collar as a priest. However, in truth it was another identity completely which had singled me out to take this call. The ID that all of us who have been baptised carry, the sign of the Cross marked in oil on our foreheads, the sign that Christ claims us for his own, the sign that we are his to use to do his saving work in his name. We are the hired help, managed and directed by the Holy Spirit.

I still don't know why the young woman thought we might be able to help, unless it was the word 'rehabilitation' that persuaded her we might be the right service. I don't know either what, if anything, I did to practically assist but I know that her situation, her concern, her humanity touched me and sent me home in a very different mood than usual. Not about being grateful that I wasn't in that mess but moved by another's care for a fellow human being, uplifted by a meaningful encounter, a glimpse of the kingdom of God at work.

Identity, who I am, goes far beyond a passport, driver's licence, utility bill. Our true identity is who we are in the eyes of God, who he created us to be and our identity as Christians comes with a job description outlined in Paul's letter to the Romans.

Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honour.

We journey through this world together. More than ever these past few months, we have learned the importance of being there for each other, if not in person, then by phone or email or Zoom. We have learnt too about how much we need one another. We might not always have practical answers but we are there.

Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep.

Those words more than any others outline the work of a priest, sum up our role as Christians. Just as in that call I took, we might not have all the answers, we might not have any answers. The need of the person next to us may be way beyond any experience we have encountered.

But we can listen, we can show that someone cares and is willing to try and help, we can share our human condition in the light of God's love. We can

Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep.

In his public ministry, Jesus gave us the example, from rejoicing at the wedding in Cana to weeping over the death of Lazarus. In Christ, we learn the power of being open to the needs of others, of putting others before ourselves. As Jesus taught the disciples

If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.

For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it.

In letting the Cross be our ID, we find a richness of life that is opened up to us. It is not about being happy and carefree, rather it is a profound experience of our humanity made whole in Jesus Christ.

If I may give some personal examples.

In normal times, I marry several times over the course of a summer. These aren't my weddings, my celebrations but in joining with others on their special day, I can experience and share in their joy – as Fr Fergus will do twice today! I can't say I always look forward to weddings but I am always glad afterwards that I had that opportunity to be a part of something which was so important to someone else. For that afternoon, our lives are joined in such a powerful way.

Likewise, at work, I have the privilege of trying to support people and their families in a time of tragedy and sorrow.

Sometimes we can contribute to a person's recovery, sometimes it feels as though we can achieve little. But as staff we acknowledge that we carry each person's hurt with us, that we are affected by each person's story and by the pain that it has brought them. We share in their lives at a time of great sorrow.

Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep.

We may never see the fruit of the seeds that we have sown as we make our way through this world but we can be confident that God has used us to carry out his purpose, that in being true to our ID of the cross, we are united as brothers and sisters in Christ and that the fullness of life is ours. Amen.

The Reverend Michelle Montrose