

Sunday 19th September 2021
Trinity 16 (B)

Liverpool Parish Church

OT: Wisdom 1.16-2.1,12-22

NT: James 3.13-4.3,7-8a

G: Mark 9.30-37

As people of faith, we are surrounded by conflicting ways of being. How do we demonstrate our faith in a way that satisfies both God and humankind? Because whether we admit it or not we are concerned with how others see us. We wish to be respected by those around us and we wish to live lives that do not bring the Gospel into disrepute. Like the priest who when driving always wore a scarf no matter how hot the weather because he felt the Church had enough image problems without him adding to it with his swearing at other road users! How do we reconcile success in this world with service to God?

Growing up, my experience of the Roman Catholic approach to life was that it was fairly jolly, once you got passed all that guilt especially where sex was concerned. Holy days were holidays and Sundays were days of celebration. This in contrast to my Baptist grandmother's approach where the Sabbath was a sombre day for quiet and Bible reading. And I remember from those early holidays that Anglesey like many Welsh counties was a dry county where all the pubs were closed on Sundays. It seemed to me that the lower the church, the more miserable you were supposed to be.

Think back to the gospel readings where the Pharisees criticised Jesus and the apostles for their supposed infringements of the Sabbath, eating the corn in the fields, curing the sick.

And Jesus response

The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath.

In other words, the Sabbath is our opportunity to use time wisely to refresh ourselves and our relationship with God and our families. There might be a time for sackcloth and ashes but Sunday isn't it.

People without faith can often believe, wrongly I hope, that we who go to church are fundamentally miserable, wracked by guilt and ignorant in worldly ways. We can be the butt of jokes, misunderstood and sometimes the target of abuse.

Serving God, living a life of faith, should not be a burden. We do God no favours if we wear our belief in him with a heavy heart, if we give the impression to others that Christianity is a life of deprivation. We don't need to be downcast in this world in order to be happy in the next. We should not equate happiness with evil. I rather think that evil brings no sustainable happiness.

One of the Collects for Matins from the Book of Common Prayer says
to serve God is perfect freedom.

This is our key in both our sacred and secular life.

Let us come back to the letter of James and his words of wisdom
Draw near to God and he will draw near to you.

We should put aside consideration for ourselves and coming close to God, Open our hearts to the guidance of the Holy Spirit, And this will bring us to a life of service to others. If we are called to be joyful in our faith, we are called to remember the two great commandments

You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.

and

You shall love your neighbours as yourself.

We will live hollow lives if we only live for ourselves. If we want to be loved and respected by others, we should put away our needs and focus on the needs of others. In our work, no matter what it is, we will find true satisfaction, respect and appreciation by doing the best possible job we can in the service of others. This is true for all of us and a lesson we've learned throughout the pandemic. Yes, we've always realised the importance of medical staff but how grateful were we for shop workers who continued to be there and who knew how important lorry drivers are in so many aspects of our daily lives? Putting others before ourselves is not a sign of weakness but a sign of strength, a faint reflection of the love that God has for each person.

I asked at the beginning, how do you reconcile success in this world with service to God?

May we come to see that the two are not mutually exclusive. The solution lies in how we define success. God wishes us to be successful in all our undertakings. But his definition of success may differ from how others see it. If we only think in terms of financial reward, of greater power and authority, we will be disappointed. Such symbols of success are transitory, treasure susceptible to fade and turn to ashes, treasure that can cause us worry and anxiety as we desperately try to cling on to. Money and power are not evil in themselves, what can become evil is how we use them. Let us be grateful for the good things we enjoy but let us put them to good use to serve those who do not have the same benefits.

Through the grace of God may we come to see that by being successful in this world, we are praising God. We are not burying our talents but working to develop them so we use them wisely for the greater good. And let us remember to do so not with a grimace on our faces but with a smile.

The hymn, *All people that on earth do dwell*, has more than one version.

One edition has the line, *Him serve with fear*

but I prefer

All people that on earth do dwell

Sing to the Lord with cheerful voice,

*him serve with **mirth**, his praise forth tell,*

come ye before him and rejoice.

Amen.

The Revd Michelle Montrose