

Well for your new rector, this week has been a another series of ‘firsts’. These included my first experience of a Town Council meeting, a Deanery Synod, a Deanery Chapter meeting, and a PCC meeting – and all that within one 24 hour period!

Straight after this service I will be doing my first baptism. I am looking forward to it, and I invite you (if you have time) to stay on to support little Milo as he joins our church family. To me, it is wonderful to think that our font – made in 1399 – is where the journey of faith of generations of Richmond residents has begun. Baptism is when we become ‘in Christ’, when we join the ‘Body of Christ’: the worldwide Church. So whilst we will all become little Milo’s ‘brothers and sisters in Christ’, for those of you who were also baptised in that same font there will surely be an even stronger bond.

In our gospel reading, we heard Jesus talk about his brothers and sisters, and mother. He actually says, ‘Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother.’ We could interpret that as meaning that whoever brings Christ into the world is his ‘mother’ – and this is the task with which we have all been entrusted.

The context of this saying is that Jesus had been hemmed in by the crowds. We are told that his family had come to ‘restrain’ him, but this may simply mean that they wanted to protect him. At the same time, the scribes – the people who, as you may recall from last week, Jesus had exposed as hypocrites – were accusing him of being out of his mind; ‘by the ruler of the demons he casts out demons’, they were saying. With great authority, Jesus then suggests that any kingdom (or house, or organisation) divided against itself could not stand. I am sure we can all think of present-day examples of this!

I am reminded here of the wise thought that the best way to destroy our enemies is to turn them into friends. As Jesus himself said, ‘Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you’. In other words, we are to advance the values of God’s kingdom by turning upside down the values of the world.

As you know, our bible readings each week are chosen for us: the ‘Revised Common Lectionary’ is used in churches all around the world, and across the denominations. As we work our way through a particular gospel, and this year it is Mark’s gospel, the Old and New Testament readings chosen relate to the theme of the gospel passage in question.

Well, that’s the theory! I must confess, at first sight I found it hard to see how our readings today from Genesis and 2 Corinthians relate to the themes we have just considered.

Our passage from Genesis concerns the myth of the Fall – after which Satan in the form of the serpent is told by God, ‘I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers’. Think about it: regardless of what we consider to be the origin of human sinfulness, there clearly is division all around us; malign forces seek to deepen that division whilst our task is to help defeat it, to turn things around.

The best way to defeat human sinfulness is to turn to Christ, and put our faith in his victory on the cross. That is what baptism – Milo’s today, and ours (whether in *that* font or another) – is all about. Listen again to the promises made in a baptism service – and again in a confirmation service, this time by the candidates for themselves:

To follow Christ means dying to sin and rising to new life with him.

Therefore I ask:

Do you reject the devil and all rebellion against God?

I reject them.

Do you renounce the deceit and corruption of evil?

I renounce them.

Do you repent of the sins that separate us from God and neighbour?

I repent of them.

Do you turn to Christ as Saviour?

I turn to Christ.

Do you submit to Christ as Lord?

I submit to Christ.

Do you come to Christ, the way, the truth and the life?

I come to Christ.

Then comes this prayer for the candidates:

Fight valiantly as a disciple of Christ
against sin, the world and the devil,
and remain faithful to Christ to the end of your life.

This is what St Paul in our second reading is saying we are to do. Whilst the reality of our mortal bodies is that they grow weaker and our physical powers diminish, our ‘inner nature is being renewed day by day’. We are to be open to this renewal, so that the transformation of our own resurrection can begin *now*. A better word than transformation is *transfiguration*: we are being renewed from within. So we can be confident that in the resurrection we will find that our outer nature will grow ‘brighter’ and stronger: the process of decay will be reversed.

In Christ we see defeat turned into victory and the world’s values turned upside-down; in his kingdom the last shall be first.

In this ancient town of Richmond, where the font of the parish church was made 619 years ago, and where we cherish our many ancient traditions, we are not looking back but forwards – not least to the coming of God’s kingdom here on earth. This is the prayer said before Town Council meetings, a prayer which would be appropriate for us to use, for ourselves, each day:

Almighty Father, who in the beginning created a world of order and loveliness, help the members of the Town Council to guard and preserve what is fair and lovely in this ancient town: that ever mindful of the good wrought by those who laboured here before them, they, by their effort and integrity in office, may speed the work of your kingdom, through Jesus Christ, our Lord.

Amen.