

Love made real

6 November 2022

Job 19.23-27a

3 before Advent 2 *Thessalonians 2.1-5,13-17*

Revd. Alan Keeler

Luke 20.27-38

Letters of lead

Being a vicar opens up all sorts of opportunities. for a year in my previous parish I was the chaplain to the mayor of Bexley. She lived in my road but in the years before her appointment I have known her as a local councillor and conducted her mother's funeral.

Being the mayor's chaplain meant saying prayers at the opening of council meetings. It also meant attending events with the mayor and being present to say prayers on other occasions.

One of these other occasions was the rededication of a War Memorial. During the First World War there had been an explosion in a munitions factory and quite a number of the workers had been killed. A memorial had been set up but over the years the weather had taken its toll. The memorial had been refurbished and I was invited to say prayers of dedication.

The refurbishment meant repairing the lettering of the names of those who were killed. The means of adding the lettering had been by carving out the stone and filling the incision with lead. It is a very durable means of adding words to a stone monument.

It is this very means that Job in our Old Testament reading cries out for. He says:

'O that my words were written down!
O that they were inscribed in a book!
O that with an iron pen and with lead
they were engraved on a rock for ever!'

Job has suffered very tragic circumstances and he wants to express his pain and his words not just to pass away. It is not only the physical loss that he wants noted but he wants to have truth recognised and justice done for ever.

A moral faith

This cry of Job is demanding that the wrongs of the world are recognised and determined action is taken to ensure that life is good.

This sort of attitude is a challenge when people are wanting spirituality. Yes we want more than a material existence. Beauty, art and literature are great treasures. But if the hungry are not fed and

the powerful gets away with violence a merely aesthetic dimension of life is not sufficient.

Morality is a challenge if people concentrate on a well organised religion. The Church of England is very good at this with royal weddings, the funeral of Queen Elizabeth and the upcoming coronation of King Charles the third. But religion must also touch the hearts of people where they are, to bring ancient wisdom and pastoral comfort.

One of the great treasures that the Christian Faith has been able to bring to the world is the rule of law. In England we can go back to Magna Carta and the discussions that led up to that were built on the studies of the church particularly Old Testament Law. But as well as establishing law it must then grow so that fresh situations and new understandings are respected and protected. As an example in recent decades the law in respect of women has been greatly developed as too the position of ethnic minorities and people who are gay. Morality matters, but it is not static.

In terms of faith we want something that is spiritual and practical, well ordered and personal, clearly explained and developing. It is these issues that our Christian tradition has continually wrestled with and in the last few decades gone through some great fires of its own making.

Sexual abuse

It is at the heart of the Christian faith that human beings are both truly noble and made in the image of God but also spoilt and capable of great wrong. Our worship expresses this as we begin with a prayer of confession. The assurance is that God like a good parent forgives. The trouble is familiarity might breed contempt.

In recent decades it has been evident that there has been sexual abuse in the church and committed not least by the clergy and there have been cover ups.

It is with great pain that the church has had to examine itself, investigate afresh the actions of people who were supposed to be trusted and to plan a way of life that is actively seeking to be safer. In recent months another report has been received about historic child abuse.

My guess is that none of this is new to us. The details have been in the national press and the whole enterprise of safeguarding has been pursued in a determined way, not least here in Saint Mary's.

So this morning I'm wanting us to be able to acknowledge the importance of Job's cry and that it has been heard from many people in the world and in church life as they have suffered. We must underline that safeguarding matters and vigilance remains important. And this is difficult.

Facing the difficulties

I can remember probably 20 years ago when safeguarding was in its infancy and new practises were being demanded. People in my church doing youth work were frequently affronted. They had always been trusted what had changed? They were professional people such as teachers and they were now being questioned. Folk who had done youth work many years ago would say 'if this happened in my day I would just have resigned.'

The reasons for safeguarding are about actions that are horrible and it is quite natural to want to distance yourself particularly if your experience has been good.

In approaching safeguarding I've always wanted people to find confidence in what they are to do and clarity in what are very difficult issues. If these attitudes are in place we can own the demands given to us so we are not fearful and leave it for other people to sort out.

I think there are two particular things I would like as a takeaway from today. One is for everybody in church to be aware that safeguarding matters. It doesn't mean it's everybody's immediate responsibility. But it is something that is very important that we all have an interest in. Life is so busy including church life but sometimes important things can get lost as we are engaged in in other pieces of hard and valuable service. Safeguarding matters and everybody should know that it has an important place in who we are as a Christian community.

The second thing to take away is that we are in the business of the glory of God. God longs for people to flourish and that we are continually invited to see how important our lives and the lives of our neighbours are in God's eyes. It is out of this strong vision of goodness the church life is to grow and develop. But to do this there will be times when we have to stand our ground and with determination work for new challenges.

Domestic violence

I want to take one example. At the back of church on the safeguarding notice board there is a large

red poster about the White Ribbon campaign. This is about addressing domestic violence.

Domestic Violence is a major issue in our society. Many women can be assaulted, coercively controlled or made homeless. About two women a week or killed by their partners.

The Diocese of Rochester considers the White Ribbon campaign one of its flagship activities. It was launched several years ago and I went to a conference that Bishop Simon had put together.

There were about fifty people on this conference, only three were men. At one point during the afternoon I did point this out obviously with some sort of criticism about my fellow male colleagues who did not consider it a priority.

Domestic violence is a matter of safeguarding, of freeing people from abuse in their relationships. It is a tragic situation that many women live with and a lesser proportion of men. It is hard to talk about. If we do encounter people experiencing domestic violence it will not be easy to address or resolve. But like Job there are people crying out for release from their situation.

But surely we want such a dreadful thing to be challenged where it is present. We will probably only be able to do this if we've been informed and we feel confident about what to do. It is now mandatory that everybody on a PCC undertakes safeguarding basic awareness training and also domestic violence training. Our PCC will be talking about this on Thursday. But of course anybody from the congregation may take part in this training.

My heart faints within me!

From time to time you may watch a television programme which ends with a statement that viewers may have been affected by the issues they have seen and details given about a helpline.

I will be surprised if we not affected by the issues of safeguarding. It is staring at the brokenness of the world and because we have seen things or experienced things we will be affected.

But we are talking about wanting to find the glory of God and if that means facing the darkness, if it means doing some training, if it means our church growing in its confidence about safety it is good. If you have been affected or even freshly motivated and want to talk with someone, we're here for you