

## **Proper 17 (Trinity 12)**

A sermon preached by the Rector, the Very Reverend Tim Barker, at the parish church of St Andrew, Guernsey on Sunday 30 August 2020

*Readings: Romans 12 vv 9-end and Matthew 16 vv 21-end*

The pattern of Sunday worship has changed significantly during my life. Until I left home to go to university in the mid 1970s, I was used to morning prayer – Mattins – as the main service on a Sunday morning. Holy Communion was celebrated at 8 am, quietly and devoutly. But only once a month did we celebrate Holy Communion in the best-attended mid-morning service. That was very much the pattern of worship across the north west of England, although there were some more exotic, high church parishes where Holy Communion was celebrated more regularly.

By the time I went to university, the parish communion movement had spread widely, and there was a growing awareness, across the whole range of the Church, that Sunday worship should be ‘the Lord’s people gathered around the Lord’s table on the Lord’s day’. Holy Communion became the main service across the whole Church of England, high and low alike. This change came side by side with the long process of liturgical revision in the Church of England. Until the 1960s, the Book of Common Prayer was uniquely the foundation document for Anglican worship, but then came a period of revision and experiment over some forty years. This began with the ‘series 1’ services which legalised the 1928 revisions to the Prayer Book which were widely used, even though the United Kingdom Parliament had rejected the revised Prayer Book in heated debates in 1928 and 1929.

This was followed quickly by ‘series 2’, which introduced more modern language and drew on the liturgical scholarship of previous decades; the further revision of ‘series 3’; and, in 1980, the publication of the Alternative Service Book. Finally, in 2000, Common Worship was published, which embraces the best of old and new styles of worship and looks set to be the book that will continue to nourish Anglican worship for the years to come.

Looking back to my childhood and adolescence, what I value most is that I was soaked in scripture and the psalms. As a choirboy, I attended Mattins and Evensong Sunday by Sunday; we sang the psalms and heard substantial passages of the Old Testament and the New Testament at both services. The change to Holy Communion as the main service on a Sunday, and the decline in the number of people attending two Sunday services, means that many have lost their familiarity with the psalms, the so-called ‘hymn book of the Old Testament’. And, like many churches, here at St Andrew’s, we have just two readings from the Bible during our service. There is always a reading from one of the gospels, focussing on Matthew’s, Mark’s and Luke’s gospels over a three-year cycle, and a reading from the New Testament (the Acts of the Apostles or the letters of Paul and others) or the Old Testament.

Much as I value the weekly Holy Communion services, I note with regret that many faithful Christians have less familiarity with the Bible as a whole. And that’s a big challenge.

Saying Morning and Evening Prayer during the week exposes me to significant passages of scripture – at the moment, the historical books of the Old Testament and the Acts of the Apostles in the morning and Proverbs and Mark’s gospel in the evening. And the psalms are the foundation of both services as they have been for centuries.

The psalms are important. They have been the foundation of Christian worship from the earliest days. Jesus quotes the psalms in the gospels. And all human life is there. Praise and lament. Certainty and questions. Joy and anger. So much so that there are some verses from some psalms from which we recoil.

So the Christians in Rome who received St Paul's letter might have been less surprised that we are with Paul's rather startling words in today's New Testament reading about how we should treat our enemies: 'by doing this you will heap burning coals on their heads.' Andrew Davison, a theologian at Cambridge University, offers the hope that Paul had in mind the purifying coals such as we find in Isaiah's vision of God rather than coals of torment, but Paul is probably referring to Proverbs chapter 25, where we find the same words, and the expectation that God's wrath is put into effect by human agency.

But we need to embrace this section of Paul's letter as a whole. Paul is deeply conscious that when Jesus reveals God's love most decisively, he shows it – not in something that soothes and calms and cools, but on a cross. Jesus shows God's unrestrainable love, not by calling down fire on his enemies, but in suffering himself.

To follow God, we must pick up our own cross and walk the way of love.

The reading from Romans shows us what this love looks like in practice. It's not a list of nice actions, with love leading the list. Love is the command, and what follows is this love explained in detailed, illuminated, if you like. Hear the passion, the energy, the effort in this love. Genuine love: hating what is evil, being devoted to what is good; showing love for one another; outdoing one another in showing honour; being unflagging in energy; being aglow with the Spirit; serving the Lord; rejoicing in hope; remaining steadfast in suffering; persisting in prayer; sharing in the needs of the saints; striving to show hospitality to strangers.

Read the whole passage again. Use it as a checklist, a litmus test. This way of love that reflects God's passion is not easy; it is counter-intuitive for many and counter-cultural – especially the outpouring of hate on social media. Paul presents a way of life from which we might be more eager to step aside, rather than risk the kind of pain that comes with being set ablaze with the fire of God's love. 'Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.'

God's love burns on. Just imagine a world where we allow that fire of God's love to blaze.