

Proper 15

A sermon preached by the Rector, the Very Reverend Tim Barker, at the parish church of St Andre Guernsey on Sunday 14 August 2022

Readings: Hebrews 11 v 29 – 12 v 2 and Luke 12 vv 49-56

Mediaeval stained glass, such as we find in some of the great cathedrals of France such as Chartres and Bourges, and the glass that survived the predations of the Reformation and the Puritan excesses of the seventeenth century in Canterbury Cathedral and elsewhere in the British Isles, is gloriously realistic. The mediaeval artists tell the stories of the Bible and the saints to people who could not read. How they could explore the pictures in windows far above them, in the days before spectacle prescribing reached the standards we know today, is a mystery.

In contrast, Victorian stained glass artists have a lot to answer for.

Some of the best nineteenth century artists, such as William Morris, some of whose work we can see in St Stephen's church, and Charles Eamer Kempe, produced magnificent work, which it is a joy to study.

But during the nineteenth century, so many churches were being built to meet the needs of the growing populations in towns and cities, that the appetite for stained glass was greater than the best studios could satisfy. Inevitably there is much second rate and third rate work.

Here in Guernsey in the nineteenth century, there was much enthusiasm for restoring the ancient parish churches, and building the new churches in St Peter Port and Cobo. The interior of St Andrew's church is essentially Victorian, with little remaining evidence of the interior as it would have been known in mediaeval times, during the century and more of Calvinist polity and the first century and a half after the restoration of the Church of England in Guernsey.

One of the problems of the poorer glass, alongside the problem that the pictures are deteriorating, is the depiction of Jesus in Biblical scenes and the depiction of the saints. Too many of the saints we find in Church windows seem to be anodyne and dull. Their depictions lack character. They are hardly inspiring.

How far away this is from the descriptions of the saints we find in the pages of the New Testament and in the stories of the church over the following centuries. These people are full of life. They are characters who can intrigue and inspire us. They are anything but dull and insipid.

The list of heroes of the faith which the writer of the letter to the Hebrews offers us in today's New Testament reading are very much a mixed bag. Some have succeeded spectacularly. Others have failed, at least in human terms. One who receives a particular mention is Rahab, whose life until the moment of her triumph would scarcely have suggested that she would be listed as one of the heroes of faithfulness to God.

What this list tells us, of course, is that God can do great things even with failure. What matters to God, what really counts, is not success or failure, but faithfulness. If you like, process, rather than outcomes. The race of life, the race which God invites us to run, is like no other. It is not the Commonwealth Games but the race of life. It is more of an extended marathon than a sprint. And there are few medals at the end.

Christians are called to follow a servant, and not a winner. Jesus led, not by dominating but by service. His triumph was his humiliating death on the cross. That was his winner's podium. It is from his death on the cross that he rises gloriously and triumphantly to the victory of resurrection, and transformation beyond our imagining for all who follow him in faith and hope.

Christian discipleship is an invitation to give ourselves fully to God; to make the world a place where the seeds that God sows can grow and flourish; to work with God in faithfulness.

Yesterday was one of those days in which the Church's calendar gives us three saints, three heroes of the faith, to remember. Three very different people who are encouraging us in our journey of faith.

Jeremy Taylor was a scholar in the seventeenth century, a time of great religious and political turmoil, the century in which in the British Isles a king, Charles I, was executed, years of civil war followed, after which a new king, Charles II, restored confidence, and established the Church of England as we know it both in England and in the Channel Islands. Taylor was a bishop in Ireland, remembered for his deeply spiritual writings, especially *The Rule and Exercise of Holy Living* and especially *The Rule and Exercise of Holy Dying*.

Florence Nightingale is perhaps the best known of the three. Born into a wealthy family, in spite of their opposition, she insisted that she wished to train as a nurse. She worked zealously to improve the conditions of the wounded during the Crimean War. On her return to England, she was the pioneer of modern nursing. She was sustained by her Christian faith through many years of her own ill health until her death in 1910.

Octavia Hill, the third of yesterday's trio, was appalled at the conditions in which the children she taught in London were living. She bought slum properties, managed them in a sympathetic yet financially prudent way, and became a pioneer in housing reform, setting the scene for further developments of social housing. One of her concerns was that her tenants, and all urban workers, should have access to open space; she was instrumental, with Canon Hardwicke Rawnsley and Sir Robert Hunter, in founding the National Trust. She, too, was strongly motivated by her faith.

None of these three is dull or insipid. They have run the race, and they are role models for us who are called and chosen by God 'to run the race that is set before us.'