

Last Sunday after Trinity Proper 25

A sermon preached by the Rector, the Very Reverend Tim Barker, at the parish church of St Andrew Guernsey on Sunday 25 October 2020

Readings: 1 Thessalonians 2 vv 1-8 and Matthew 22 vv 34-end

On the south wall of the church are two inscribed lists of names. One is the names of the churchwardens of this parish. The other is the list of the rectors. Like the memorials in the church, these lists remind us of continuity. We are the church in St Andrew in our generation, but we have received this treasure from those who have gone before us; and we have an obligation to pass on the Christian faith to those who come after, and to entrust the church to them, knowing that each generation will adapt the building, sympathetically one hopes, so that it meets the needs of each generation.

That's why we need to take the time to ensure that the work we are proposing to do inside and outside the church will make it better suited for the people of God and for our mission and ministry – just as did our ancestors in the nineteenth century who adapted the interior of the building so thoroughly to meet the needs of their time, even if this meant the loss of some of the earlier features.

That sense of continuity and discontinuity is a theme which we find in the readings which we have been given today.

In his letter to the Thessalonians, Paul is trying his hardest to be a good leader, following in the footsteps of his ancestors. A spiritual descendant of Moses, Paul's main aim as founding father of the community is to enable the Thessalonians, in northern Greece, to lead a life worthy of God. The passage just after the verses we have heard today states this explicitly: 'We dealt with each one of you like a father with his children, urging and encouraging you, and pleading that you lead a life worthy of God, who calls you into his own kingdom and glory.' Paul outlines a demanding form of Christ-like leadership. We can only hope to live with the type of character that Paul claims to be living along with his disciples. According to his letter, Paul's leadership is without trickery and deceit, selfishness and greed, and full instead of honourable suffering, faith in God, gentleness, and care. It's a very high standard to live up to.

Nevertheless, it is clear that Paul is striving to teach and nurture the young followers of Christ in Thessalonica. He is raising a new generation, he is building his descendants, and therefore the spiritual descendants following in the way of Christ. The way we treat those who are around us and come after us must equally be modelled on what we see of God in Jesus. If we can proclaim the gospel both in what we say and in what we do in our lifetime, we may leave to those who come after us something better - even better than we received.

This is exactly what Jesus did.

Jesus was able to raise up a new generation, a new spiritual community, a new way of living that was true to the inheritance of the patriarchs and prophets in the Old Testament, and left a transforming power and relationship with God to those who picked up his mantle, like Paul.

Jesus' way of teaching and living and proclaiming the Good News was nothing like anyone had seen before. It was radically different to what his ancestors had known and what they had taught. Some of the religious leaders were fed up. Our Gospel passage takes us to the Tuesday before Christ's crucifixion. Matthew first records three of Jesus'

parables, and then three of the religious leaders' trick questions of Jesus. The reading today comes during their last attempt to entrap Jesus in his own words; this is not the type of descendant they had wished for themselves!

According to the traditions of the Talmudic rabbis, dating from the 3rd century, there are 613 commandments in the law of Moses. There are 248 'positive commandments', to perform a particular act, and 365 'negative commandments, to abstain from certain acts. These are the laws that the religious leaders were called to follow and enforce. No wonder they were such a burden for the people of Israel and why the lawyers had such a huge responsibility to present these commandments to the Jewish people and encourage them to observe these commandments. And of course, they failed, time after time, as the load was too great.

This is why the response from Jesus is so remarkable, when the lawyers ask Jesus which commandment is the greatest. He tells them, simply, 'Love God, love your neighbour.'

These two commandments, if taken seriously, have the power to change the world.

In his answer, Jesus is faithful to the rabbinic law, the laws of his ancestors; 'You shall love the Lord' is part of the daily prayer of the Jewish people, the basic affirmation of Jewish faith. The ethical and moral principles of Judaism state that 'The world stands on three things: on the Torah, on the service of God, and upon acts of loving-kindness.' The commandments are familiar pieces of Jewish culture, teaching, and religion.

But the way Jesus embodies the commandments upends familiar expectations. In the exchange that follows, about the Messiah, the religious leaders are stumped, and so they begin to plot ways to remove the threat.

Despite their best attempts, those who feared Jesus' power were not able to suppress him. By being crucified, executed as a political martyr, Jesus demonstrated God's love in a way that would change his descendants forever.

Today we are still calling ourselves followers of Christ. The mantle of Christ's teachings, life, responsibilities, and authority have been passed from one generation to the next over thousands of years. And in each of these lives, in yours and in mine, in the lives of our ancestors and in the lives of those yet to be born, God is present, and God will remain so throughout all times.