SERMON FOR STOWE CHURCH MARCH 29th, 2020 – PASSION SUNDAY

I was looking forward to being with you in church this Sunday and renewing our relationships but …….

Before you start to read what I’ve written please look at the readings set for today that are at the end. Then, hopefully, what I’ve written will make more sense!

Passion Sunday tells us that we are coming towards the end of Lent and looking more and more to Easter. But there is a risk that as we yearn for the celebration of Easter we minimise the significance of the last days of Jesus’ life. As I read the readings for today it struck me that they both invite us and warn us to compare ourselves, with all our imperfections and faults, with the perfect life and nature of Jesus.

In the Philippians passage Paul, after praising his friends in Philippi, rightly sets Jesus on a pedestal far above and beyond what we can imagine. Paul is mouth open in amazement at his glimpse of the full majesty and power and status of Jesus; at the overwhelming generosity of God the Father in sending Jesus to be a mere human being with all the limitations that this would imply for the Son of God. This happened not to intimidate or shame us but to encourage us to base our lives – our relationships with others - on the life of Jesus and our aspirations on a full relationship with God and Jesus through the Spirit. I suggest you slowly read again the second half of the Epistle and savour Paul’s worship as he describes his wonder, joy and humility as he looks at Jesus. And Paul’s is rewarded for his work in bringing the truth and implications about Jesus to others by his great joy in the effect faith and following Jesus has had on the lives of those who hear and believe. His friends in Philippi have become different better people; people who have discarded the culture and individualism of their friends and their society and become generous loving giving Christ-serving people.

This change in life style and personal expectation should be our aim particularly in these difficult times of as we look forward to weeks of isolation. It’s ironical that our secular Government has invited us as a nation to adopt Christian virtues and behaviours in considering the needs of those around us as being at least as important as our personal needs and wants. As Paul wrote in the Epistle, “*Rather, in humility, value others above yourselves not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others*.” Today, behaving in a loving selfless way is a matter of life and death particularly for the vulnerable in our society but it’s a worthwhile objective for any time. We should pray not only for a good resolution of today’s problems but also for that spirit of altruism (love) to continue after the current crisis passes. We have a responsibility to lead those around us to real and life-giving change by our actions and our words.

In the Gospel reading Mark puts two incidents next to each other to shock us. The behaviour of the disciples is amazingly crass; the contrasting one about Bartimaeus is one of my favourites. If we grasp what is happening the stories should leave us challenged to follow one and not the other. This passage comes just after the conversation between Jesus and the rich young man who is challenged about clinging to his wealth and the security and comfort it beings and his genuine desire to do what God want him to do – a challenge to each of us. Then Jesus warned his disciples again of what will happen in Jerusalem, and they didn’t understand.

Their level of non-understanding is shown by two of them coming to Jesus and claiming their place alongside him in the heavenly realm. They showed the same attachment to worldly wealth and power as the young man and their total misunderstanding of what Jesus is about. I think Jesus must have sighed deeply and then showed great generosity in responding to their request. The other disciples, of course, got to know about this and were very self-righteous in criticising James and John – and I guess we would do the same. Jesus typically used this episode as a teaching opportunity and what he said must have challenged the disciples’ assumptions. It is likely that most of them held a vision of Jesus, their Messiah, liberating the Jews from the Romans; throwing them out and then ruling in righteous power. The opposite was true. Jesus told them that they were called to be slaves – the lowest of the low – and give up everything including their lives for the sake of others as they followed God’s way. Not at all the response they expected or wanted.

*Q. What’s our expectation as we follow Jesus?*

The second half of the Gospel reading is deliberately a complete contrast. I think that the Bartimaeus story has much to teach us and challenge us. Bartimaeus was a blind beggar. He was the lowest of the low, a slave to his handicap. He heard about Jesus and thought he was the way to overcome his blindness and be brought to wholeness. I think that Bartimaeus needed spiritual healing as well as physical healing. He was an outcast – in the theology of his day his blindness was the result of his or his parents’ sins. So when he heard Jesus was close and believed that Jesus could heal him, Bartimaeus was determined not to waste the opportunity. There he was, sitting beside the road, an invisible man with no importance or status; until he decided to risk everything and took his main chance. He shouted. He made a nuisance of himself. He said, effectively, I’m just as important as you. My faith and trust in Jesus can change my life and I’m not going to let any inconvenience to the crowd stop me.

*Q. How should you react to this? Are you prepared to shout (or even whisper) to others that you put our trust in Jesus and try to be distinctive/ different?*

You might miss the next bit of information. Bartimaeus left his cloak behind as he went to meet Jesus. A cloak was the essential, irreplaceable garment for everyone. It could not be legally removed. It gave warmth in winter, protection in Summer, at night you could sleep outside and wrap yourself in your cloak. Yet Bartimaeus, the blind, man left his security behind in his effort to meet Jesus and be healed by him. If his sight had not been restored, he would have great problems finding his cloak. He made himself totally vulnerable while trying for the best thing in his life. He put everything at risk.

*Q. How much are you prepared to put at risk as you follow Jesus?*

Bartimaeus, of course, depended for his healing on Jesus’ response. So far as we know he had not met Jesus but relied on Jesus’ reputation. Jesus heard Bartimaeus and ordered him to be brought to Him.

Jesus asked Bartimaeus “what do you want me to do?”. The reply may seem obvious but it was necessary for Bartimaeus and us to be specific about what we want from God. Bartimaeus had been dependent on others for help and support. If he was healed he would lose that and have to be independent. Of course, our requests are not always answered immediately or answered as we expect but;

*Q. When you pray, how much do you trust Jesus and God for their response?*

Bartimaeus was healed. He could see and he joined Jesus and disciples as they walked up the hill to Jerusalem and Jesus’ death. Bartimaeus’ life had changed completely, and he knew how and why and he rejoiced in his new life following Jesus.

I find this story very challenging. It probes the depths of my discipleship with Jesus and asks me some very deep and challenging questions. I invite you to reflect on the questions in italics and, as we move into the last two weeks of Lent before Palm Sunday, Jesus’ Passion and Easter Resurrection measure your journey with Jesus against Bartimaeus’ journey and be encouraged by how far you have come and determined to travel further.

Amen

Ron Bundock 27 March 2020*The Collect for today*:

Most merciful God, who by the death and resurrection of your Son, Jesus Christ delivered and saved the world;

grant that by faith in Him who suffered on the cross we may triumph in the power of his victory, through Jesus Christ, your Son, our Lord. Amen

*The Epistle is Philippians 2: 1-11*

 Therefore if you have any encouragement from being united with Christ, if any comfort from his love, if any common sharing in the Spirit, if any tenderness and compassion, then make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and of one mind. Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves, not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others.

In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus:

Who, being in very nature God,
    did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage;
rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness.
And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself
    by becoming obedient to death— even death on a cross!

Therefore God exalted him to the highest place
    and gave him the name that is above every name,
 that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow,
    in heaven and on earth and under the earth,
and every tongue acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord,
    to the glory of God the Father.

*The Gospel is Mark 10:35 to 52*

Then James and John, the sons of Zebedee, came to him. “Teacher,” they said, “we want you to do for us whatever we ask.”

 “What do you want me to do for you?” he asked.

 They replied, “Let one of us sit at your right and the other at your left in your glory.”

“You don’t know what you are asking,” Jesus said. “Can you drink the cup I drink or be baptized with the baptism I am baptized with?”

 “We can,” they answered.

Jesus said to them, “You will drink the cup I drink and be baptized with the baptism I am baptized with, but to sit at my right or left is not for me to grant. These places belong to those for whom they have been prepared.”

When the ten heard about this, they became indignant with James and John. Jesus called them together and said, “You know that those who are regarded as rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them.  Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be slave of all. For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.”

 Then they came to Jericho. As Jesus and his disciples, together with a large crowd, were leaving the city, a blind man, Bartimaeus (which means “son of Timaeus”), was sitting by the roadside begging.  When he heard that it was Jesus of Nazareth, he began to shout, “Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!”

 Many rebuked him and told him to be quiet, but he shouted all the more, “Son of David, have mercy on me!”

 Jesus stopped and said, “Call him.”

So, they called to the blind man, “Cheer up! On your feet! He’s calling you.”  Throwing his cloak aside, he jumped to his feet and came to Jesus.

 “What do you want me to do for you?” Jesus asked him.

The blind man said, “Rabbi, I want to see.”

 “Go,” said Jesus, “your faith has healed you.” Immediately he received his sight and followed Jesus along the road.