**Sermon 2nd before Lent 2023 2 Tim 4: 14-18, John 15:18 to 16:5 + 33**

Over the last few Sundays a succession of preachers have been looking with you through the main themes in the wonderful mid chapters of John’s Gospel from 14 to 16. Today we have reached the tough part. In the earlier chapters we were told how Jesus spoke to encourage his disciples about his relationship with his Father and the bonds of trust and love between himself and his precious disciples, spoke about the generosity and wonder and gifts of God’s Spirit who would come soon. We have now reached the point where he had to be honest and realistic about what would happen to his church; the movement he would leave behind. The warning is stark. Times will be difficult, sometimes dramatically so, for those who believe and try to follow the Master and persuade others to do the same. So that little reading from Paul’s second letter to Timothy is a serious warning.

I think there comes a time for all of us when life seems very unfair, the odds seem stacked against us, the future seems bleak and there is no obvious way out. In our Epistle reading it seems as if the great, bold, committed evangelist Paul had reached a very low ebb. As a converted follower of Jesus in the second half of his life he travelled, was attacked, preached and converted hundreds but was now imprisoned in a dungeon, chained to the wall, and certain he was going to be executed because he chose to openly and publically worship the one true God and put his trust in Jesus and not the Emperor. And he was right, he was executed. Those who opposed him before his death, both inside the church and outside, seem to have won. He spoke bitterly about Alexander the metalworker who challenged what Paul said and taught in the church in Thessalonica, was expelled but took with him a sizeable portion of the congregation. But even as he confessed his despair at how others had treated him Paul renewed his faith and trust that God’s Spirit would be with him and would give him the courage and strength he needed to endure whatever lay ahead. He wrote, “*But the Lord stood at my side and gave me strength so that through me the message might be fully proclaimed and all the Gentiles might hear it. The Lord will rescue me from every evil attack*.” To paraphrase Paul, ‘Yes, times are tough. I’m finding life difficult. But this is no time to abandon what I believe and for safety’s sake be quiet. My calling is to speak what God’s Spirit has taught me and I will put myself at risk, whatever the cost. ‘

When I read this and pondered I asked myself what sort of rescue does Paul expect from the God he worshipped all his life? Does he expect to live for ever; to be immortal?

Today’s Gospel reading gives us Jesus’ answer. The reading we heard comes at the end of Jesus’ final teaching. He talked about the suffering that he would experience and which had to come for the sake of his followers – you and me. If the world hates you, he said implying that it is a near certainty that the world will hate you –and Paul was a witness.

The Gospel we heard speaks very explicitly about the problems and challenges that Christians will face and Jesus, in all things, is the forerunner for us. *“If the world hates you, keep in mind that it hated me first. If you belonged to the world it would love you as its own. But you do not belong to the world; I have chosen you out of the world*.” This tells us that the first and ongoing challenge that we face is within ourselves. It challenges us to recognise how closely we are linked to the world around us. How much are we moved and guided and manipulated by the culture and morals around us? How closely are we shackled to the material and technological features of the society in which we live? Are our lives distinctive and, at least partially, at odds with the world around us. I can’t answer for you but only for myself. You will not be surprised that in my honest moments I recognise that I am greatly influenced by the world and culture around me. There are some things I do that I think are close to what God’s Spirit desires. I despise and do what I can to oppose the war in Ukraine. Tick that box. The Earthquake in Turkey/Syrian appals me and has compelled us to donate to relief. Tick that box. But other parts of my everyday life remain stubbornly unconverted. But I do believe. I do study. I do pray for grace to follow more nearly day by day. I’m reminded of a notice in the study of one of the Vicars of Buckingham that read ‘Please be patient with me. God hasn’t finished with me yet.’ We are all on a journey both with and towards Jesus and He warns us of the challenges we face day by day.

But the last part of this passage gives us reassurance that God knows our issues, understands our issues and is on our side. Jesus spoke about the support we can, if we ask and accept, be given by the work of God’s Spirit. He said, “*When the Advocate* (that is the Counsellor or the Spirit) *comes whom I will send to you, he will testify about me.*” Note it’s not convince us or compel us but testify; lay the evidence, the choices before us so we can choose.

I don’t know if you have ever asked the question about how the Gospel writers managed to get all the events and teaching that Jesus did after the events had happened. I think this passage gives us the answer. One of the works of the Spirit is to stimulate people’s memories about how Jesus worked and what he said and the same can be said about our own times. The Spirit testifies about what has happened so that people are encouraged and enabled – that is given the courage to do what they are called to do. Jesus said to those in the Upper room after his resurrection that his followers were to testify to what he, Jesus, had done and was doing. That command is relevant today for all of us in our environment. Jesus and his disciples were living in times that were much more brutal and dangerous than conditions that we will, I hope, ever experience – notwithstanding what is happening in the conflict areas of our world by natural or man-made disasters. The new Christian church was very much at risk of physical persecution than we can imagine. Relative to them we live in calm and tranquillity despite the things that are wrong with our country today. We live in a society that is fairly civilised and safe. That’s why we don’t experience the dire consequences that our forebears in the Roman and later worlds experienced.

In the Upper Room Jesus said to Thomas, “*because you have seen me you have believed. Blessed are those who have not seen me and yet have believed.*” We are part of the history of Christian folk who have believed, and therefore have been, and are, and will be blessed by God through his Spirit and we should, at all times and in all places give thanks for the blessings we have received.

AMEN