

Homily for the 12th Sunday after Trinity, 30 August 2020

We are at the start of a new term, September often feels like that even for those of us who have long since left school. Perhaps we have family in education, or we work in a school in some way, maybe we look forward to evening classes starting up again. I always get a buzz in September – a fresh start, the delights of autumn, Advent and Christmas to look forward to.

This year is different and we approach this new time with uncertainty – teachers and pupils have a challenge ahead of them – settling into a new way of being together. I don't know about evening classes and choirs and things starting up again – it's all different this year.

It's hard not to register an underlying feeling of gloom – we would all, I am sure like to have our old freedoms back, and in this respect some people are more hard hit by necessary limitations than others. But we do need to continue to hope and reflect upon what this experience is showing us.

Looking at our readings and prayers this morning we are given a lot of hope and encouragement. To begin with we know that God is with us – everlasting God – God who is bigger than this current situation, who is more ready to hear our prayers than we are to pray. I feel better already, I think if we were able to sing today we might be singing – What a friend we have in Jesus, all our sins and griefs to bear what a privilege to carry everything to God in prayer.

In our first reading St Paul is really spelling it out, although we can do nothing except by God's grace we cannot take that as blanket permission never to change or strive. Here of course Paul is talking from experience. His life has been transformed when he came to faith in Jesus, but I think, if you read Paul's letters we can see that the everyday virtues that he is extolling didn't come easily to him.

This is very much what we are confronted with in these days. Keeping on keeping on, every day and, even when we feel gloomy. Paul puts it in rather over the top language – perhaps to emphasis it as he knows it's hard to do.

Here is the passage again in a contemporary paraphrase – which perhaps brings it down to earth and may be helpful.

Romans 12: 9-21 from *The Message*

Love from the center of who you are; don't fake it. Run for dear life from evil; hold on for dear life to good. Be good friends who love deeply; practice playing second fiddle.

¹¹⁻¹³ Don't burn out; keep yourselves fueled and aflame. Be alert servants of the Master, cheerfully expectant. Don't quit in hard times; pray all the harder. Help needy Christians; be inventive in hospitality.

14-16 Bless your enemies; no cursing under your breath. Laugh with your happy friends when they're happy; share tears when they're down. Get along with each other; don't be stuck-up. Make friends with nobodies; don't be the great somebody.

17-19 Don't hit back; discover beauty in everyone. If you've got it in you, get along with everybody. Don't insist on getting even; that's not for you to do. "I'll do the judging," says God. "I'll take care of it."

20-21 Our Scriptures tell us that if you see your enemy hungry, go buy that person lunch, or if he's thirsty, get him a drink. Your generosity will surprise him with goodness. Don't let evil get the best of you; get the best of evil by doing good.

So this is what we are asked to do as Christians. Is this what Jesus means by taking up your cross?

To live as Paul has exalted us to, is to follow Jesus but is this to take up our cross? Surely that's more about suffering and pain?

Whilst some may be called to make the ultimate sacrifice and die for their faith. We are all called to take up our cross. It is about choosing to live this day to day life of offering ourselves – to love and stand aside for others to be first, to persevere in prayer and keep going in hard times, to bless our enemies and – just like Jesus – to laugh and party with those who are happy and to have compassion and weep with those who are in distress. To be a friend to everyone, especially the outcasts. Taking up the cross is about how life may be redeemed, how good may be brought out of evil and new life emerge from the old.

So today we are challenged to take God's grace and then choose to fashion our lives as those who live in the shadow of the transforming sacrifice of Jesus, those who have taken up the cross.

It's about taking action that is generous and self-giving rather than holding back; and it's about what we make of those unlooked for blows that come to us all individually, and at the moment as a country caught up in a pandemic. How can we use this dreadful situation as a time for growth and a new found trust in God? God who is more ready to hear our prayers than we are to pray, who is bigger than this current situation and who holds us in the palm of his hand.

Amen