

Sermon – Romans 12.9-end – Matthew 16.13-20

On one level, if you are the kind of person who follows a lectionary, it seems a bit of a self-indulgent thing to be able to preach on one of your favourite Biblical texts. That is even more the case, because in the course of our three-year lectionary, such opportunities really do not come around that often - if indeed they arise at all. Somewhere in that is just the subtle reminder that our lectionary does not in its three year cycle provide us with every jot and tittle of the biblical text but rather offers something akin to edited highlights – I feel a little blessed today therefore, because one of my highlights made the cut.

In my pre-amble in the order of service this morning I pose to you a question – ‘What would be your ‘Desert Island Text’ – if you were forced to take only one passage of the Bible with you to a desert island, what would that passage be. For me, I can think of several - and I do hope in reality that I am never caused to make a final choice - but in my handful of likely candidates one of our texts this morning would certainly be numbered among them.

It is not our offering from the prophet Isaiah nor the words from the Gospel of Matthew, weighty as they are, but rather the glorious exhortation offered to us by St Paul in these verses from Romans 12.

Beautiful though is that thing that is said to be in the ‘eye of the beholder’ and for some the very thought of claiming more esteem for the words of Paul than the words lifted from one of the Gospels would be a hard thing indeed. That is though, at least in part, because Paul has something of a reputation as being difficult – both at times difficult to understand, not to mention difficult to agree with.

I do however make it a part of my life’s mission to try and get people to love Paul just a little more – to commit a bit more time to trying to understand him – and not fall into the trap of simply restating some of the prejudice that exists against him without really giving him a chance. I am apt to misquote a book title to you – the title of one of the most significant and powerful novels I have read in the past decade, ‘We need to talk about Kevin’ by Lionel Shriver – and offer you the thought instead that ‘We need to talk about St Paul’.

He was the church’s first significant theologian, the person who took the story of Jesus and began the rather awesome task of trying to work out how that story might explain everything. He is admittedly in much of this thinking on his feet – working it out as he goes along – and as someone human seeking to do that, inspired as he was by the Holy Spirit, I would be prepared to admit that he has good and not so good days at the office. I could also offer you some good scholarly arguments about why some of the bits you least like him for were, in fact, not written by him at all but rather written in his name, probably a good many years after his death.

We also need to remember at times that it might be argued that he never thought that he was writing Holy Scripture – he was writing letters to certain communities dealing with certain issues and though we sometimes take what he says as suggesting that this then provides a rule that must be adhered to for all time – he was rather more likely trying to argue his way to a pragmatic solution that might close down the latest community dispute.

It is though for me when he goes beyond the pragmatic, when he has finished the cut and thrust of the latest argument and wanders – as he so often does towards the end of his

letters, into the world of encouragement and exhortation, that he – for me at least – is at his brilliant best.

Elsewhere in 2 Corinthians he will eventually tell his audience that he was not much of an orator but in these moments - boy he could write – and in this passage he has always provided something for me to aspire to. If you have the kind of Bible that sometimes offers you a non-biblical title to a section - then you can find this passage with the heading – ‘Marks of a True Christian’. For once I think it is worth another listen.

Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honour. Do not lag in zeal, be ardent in spirit, serve the Lord. Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer. Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers.

Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. Live in harmony with one another; do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly; do not claim to be wiser than you are. Do not repay anyone evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all. If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all.

And I am not the only person who likes it - because I distinctly remember that William and Kate, or if you prefer their Royal Highnesses the Duke and Duchess of Cambridge, chose this passage for their wedding service.

I am bound to say also, that whatever modern theories might be expressed about the business of ministry – it is in the phrase ‘Rejoice withy those who rejoice and weep with those who weep’ that you come somewhere close to understanding what it is, in fact, really all about.

There you go then – a sermon on the epistle – taking little or no account of the Gospel reading, as famous as that Gospel reading is. Well not quite, because I suspect we can come nowhere close to responding to the exhortation offered in my Desert Island Text by St Paul - if we are not prepared to take up our cross and follow Jesus. There is a cost to living our lives in this way and it is a cost our faith asks us to pay each day. I think Paul knew that as much as anybody did.