

LIVING FAITH SERIES: MAKING A DIFFERENCE IN SOCIETY

In the name of God, Source of all being, Eternal Word and Spirit of truth. Amen.

1. Introduction.

This, then, is the third in the series of sermons based on the bishop's 5 markers for church health and growth which goes under the general title: "Living Faith".

The observant among you will notice that this is very similar to the thoughts behind the fifth bullet point of our vision statement:

- **seeing ourselves as responsible global citizens:** standing in solidarity with all people as our sisters and brothers throughout the world by working for just economic and social structures and for a sustainable environment.

And so I make no apologies for covering much of the same ground that I covered when I preached on the vision statement last year (except, perhaps to those who were both here and who listened to and remembered every word of it!).

2. Why this marker is so important.

So first let us ask why this particular marker is there. What do these things have to do with faith?

For there is a tradition of Christian thought that says that things like just social structures and sustainable environment are not the proper concern of the church – that we should leave these issues to politicians and experts who are properly qualified to deal with them.

More personally I have heard this objection expressed in this way:

"Religion is primarily to do with our personal private lives. We come to church for personal spiritual comfort – to get away from the world and not to be confronted with all the things we might see on the news ad nauseam!"

Well firstly, I would want to say that our faith is not about escaping the world but that it is about confronting the reality of the world and finding better and more creative ways of engaging with it.

That is where we will get real comfort (=strength) – which will last even after the service is over!

3. The church and politics

But more fully, I would like to flesh out the very honourable tradition of faith engaging with political and social issues.

i. The bible

Archbishop Desmond Tutu said:

"I sometimes wonder what bible people are reading when they say that faith has nothing to do with politics"

Old Testament:

It is quite clear that huge swathes of the Old Testament are concerned with setting up a just and equitable basis for communal social life.

Both in the laws which are set out in the early part of the bible and particularly in the prophets who harshly criticised not only unfaithful religious practices, but the failure of the community to live up to its high ideals of caring for the poor, welcoming the stranger and raising up the downtrodden.

The 8th century BCE prophets went on and on about how judgment would come because Israel (and Judah) had allowed their political and social structures to become corrupt and their rich to exploit their power.

And this, they would constantly remind their listeners, was the word of the Lord!

The gospels.

Jesus stood in this same tradition – often expressing a profound compassion for the poor as the ones God particularly loved and came to serve.

And although it did not seem as though his main objective was to overthrow the oppressive Roman rule, yet he had very harsh criticism for the social structures of the Jewish community, which he felt had become corrupt and exclusive.

Jesus was not averse to graphic “direct action” (overturning the tables of the money changers), political rhetoric (his powerful invective against the Pharisees), or sermons which called for social action in the name of the Lord (Matthew ch 25).

St. Paul.

Even St. Paul, who is often seen as concerned with complex internal theological matters, is thought to have used the word “spiritual” to encompass the whole of life and not just an inner spiritual world.

Some preacher once, as a graphic illustration, decided to remove from the bible, every page that had some political or social reference to the implications of faith in God. He held it up to his congregation to demonstrate that: there was very little left!

ii. The saints

Our calendar of saints is full of people who are celebrated not just for their spirituality but for their work for social reform.

More recently, many of these have been celebrated for their attempts to challenge unjust social structures and political systems:

Martin Luther King, Oscar Romero, Desmond Tutu, Dietrich Bonhoeffer – all saw a major part of their work as challenging a political status quo. And were all inspired by their faith in Jesus Christ. Three of them were murdered for their attempts.

Let us pray that, before too long there will also be people who are celebrated as saints for their attitude to and work for the environment we live in.

iii. Christian Theology

Every time we come to church, we are reminded by our tapestry based on an icon of the Holy Trinity, that our faith is not about individuals but about building peaceful, harmonious community of persons relating to one another in love, deference and mutual respect.

4. The great Christian tradition of Justice and Peace.

But, as many have stated, there can be no true peace without justice.

Jesus said, lamenting the probable final fate of Jerusalem: “if only you knew the things that make for peace”

I think it was Oscar Romero who said:

“If I feed the poor you call me a saint. If I ask why they are poor, you call me a communist”

We can preach the good news of God’s love to the poor.

We can feed, cloth and protect the poor.

But if we leave it at that, we are only caring for a part of each person.

If a person remains powerless, disenfranchised, excluded from decisions which affect their own lives, then they lack the true human dignity that is God’s will for all people.

Jesus, said “The last will be first and the first will be last”

Mary, in the Magnificat, says “God has cast down the mighty from their thrones and has lifted up the lowly.”

There you are: on the very lips of apparently sweet demure Mary is the rhetoric of radical political revolution!!!!

It is simply not enough to just give money.

The unjust structures of society need to be challenged and overturned, so that ALL people can become properly and equally members in God’s commonwealth.

Why is this so difficult? Why is there so much resistance to the idea?

Well, I suspect, it is because we, in the affluent and powerful west, have a lot to lose! We have the lion’s share of the power and the wealth and we know that to embrace such a sentiment will require us to let go of a good deal.

We will need to change our cherished lifestyles and privileged positions in world society if we are genuinely to follow this call.

And I struggle with this as much as anyone else.

All I can hope is that as we raise the issues and work towards a common aim together, perhaps we will find ways to let go of some of the things we think we need so much and discover that, in order to live a fulfilled, joyful, meaningful life, we perhaps didn’t need quite as much as we thought we did.

5. So what do we do?

Well, we are, as a congregation already involved in a number of initiatives that will help us to be true to this part of our calling:

i. Engagement with the Wood Farm community.

Our involvement in that part of our parish is not primarily about seeking for people come to faith in Christ (though this may, of course, happen as we serve God in the name of Christ), but it is about seeking to work with the other good people in the area to build up community and stand alongside people in their struggle for a better and more wholesome life.

There are many ways this can be done. Alastair and I are now working with other members from the church to lead the way on this, but I hope you will all get involved when the opportunity comes.

ii. Holy Trinity Justice and Peace group.

As you know, this group was set up a year or so ago with the express intention to enable our congregation to engage more directly with the issues that are facing the wider world. They have already drawn our attention to many issues related to the business of working for Justice and Peace throughout the world:

- Regular articles in the magazine

- A regular campaign table at coffee on Sundays
- Seeking to bring issues of Justice and Peace to the youth clubs
- Drawing our attention to the organisation run by Etienne in the Congo for social change in that country
- They are organising a hustings from a peace and justice point of view leading up to the general elections
- Helping us to think about a parish link with an Anglican parish in a developing country
- Helping us to make more of Christian Aid week.
- interfaith relationships and work for peace between faith communities
- reflecting on our own lifestyles in our present world economy: the “Live Simply” lent course is specifically designed to help with this.

There is a lot going on here and I do encourage you to get involved where you can. They are currently looking for new members for their committee. Do talk to me or Merlin Wilcox.

iii. Fair Trade shop

Promoting Fair Trade has been a part of Holy Trinity life for a long time, but the shop opening in Headington this week! is a major leap forward. They still need more investors, customers and volunteer shop workers to make it work.

iv. Eco congregation group

Our church eco-congregation group has been at work to help us as a church community to become more environmentally friendly. Their biggest achievement so far is to campaign for a new church boiler which will be much more environmentally friendly than the old one. (We are nearly there with this one!).

But, in time this group will also challenge us to think about what we can each do to live in a way that is more in tune with our environment and less detrimental to the ecology around us.

And this one, of course, is not just about bio-diversity and the extinction of species on the Gallapagos Islands, but about our fellow human beings – usually the poorest in the world - whose livelihoods and lives are being threatened today by the effects of global warming.

6. Conclusion

LET US NOT DON'T KEEP OUR FAITH TO OURSELVES: PRIVATE AND PERSONAL!

Let us live it out in our relationships not just with the people of this church or even with the people who live near us,

But “as responsible global citizens, standing in solidarity with our sisters and brothers throughout the world”

Or, in the bishop’s words: Making a difference in society.

“Who is my neighbour?”, Jesus was asked when he told a scribe to love his neighbour as himself.

The answer:

Whoever needs your help, wherever she lives in there world, from whatever background or culture, however far removed from my own life, however hidden or forgotten, friend or foe: the one who is in any kind of need is my neighbour.

Go, and do as the Good Samaritan did even for his enemy.