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Christ Church West Wimbledon
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“8th Sunday After Trinity ”

ST JAMES 2021

I often wonder what sort of picture comes into people’s minds when the Church of England is mentioned? They might remember the comedy series of a decade ago, “Rev“, the story of a London inner-city priest, his oddball congregation and his demon-Archdeacon who was always interfering, wearing a pectoral cross and travelling everywhere by taxi. I always enjoyed the series, though all my congregations have been bigger and more tuneful and much more normal than the one portrayed. Then again, when planning the annual blessing of pet’s service in my last parish everyone started to refer to me as the Vicar of Dibley – inaccurate on a number of fronts! But it just goes to show what an odd picture many people do have of the Church of England. For example, people always assume that all clergy are desperate to become bishops! But as the fictitious Archdeacon said to the fictitious vicar in “Rev“: “there are 9,000 clergy and 100 top jobs so the chances of promotion in the C of E is the same as the promotion possibilities in the Chinese Army!”

But of course, the Church of England doesn’t always help itself in the eyes of many people. Undignified rows over the consecration of women bishops, ongoing issues of human sexuality, the recent vote of no confidence in the Bishop of Winchester, the campaign to oust the Dean of Christ Church Oxford and so on are current scandals that do us no favours whatsoever and can give

people a very distorted picture of what the Church actually is and does. Indeed, many more get their news of the Church not from the Church Times or the broadsheets but from Private Eye.

Thankfully, through all this turmoil, for most of us the work of the Church carries on regardless. Sunday by Sunday, day by day, Christian congregations carry on their work quietly and prayerfully and faithfully. That is how it should be and it is what the Church of England has always been known for. Thank goodness for a recent letter in the press which pointed out that "there are 22,000 Christian charities in Britain providing more than 23 million hours of voluntary service. Churches are often the most active community groups in any locality, helping to meet the needs of the population". It is encouraging when our church leaders confirm that the heart of the church is the local - our local churches, local schools and local congregations.

So, in all this muddle, it is good to go back to basics and to celebrate today the life of one of those Galilean fishermen who were called by Jesus. The Synoptic Gospels state that James and John were with their father by the seashore when Jesus called them to follow him. According to the Gospel of Mark, James and John were called Boanerges, or the "Sons of Thunder". James was a son of Zebedee and Salome, and brother of John the Apostle. He is also called James the Greater to distinguish him from James, son of Alphaeus, who is also known as James the Less. Yes, it is a bit confusing! James is described as one of the first disciples to join Jesus and was one of the Twelve Apostles. James was one of only three apostles whom Jesus selected to bear witness to his Transfiguration and in our 1st reading, the Acts of the Apostles records that Herod Agrippa had James executed by sword around the year 44.

But as James the fisherman became a close friend of Jesus, present at the heights of the transfiguration as well as the depths of the garden of Gethsemane, such friendship was a great privilege and could easily be

misunderstood – certainly by a pushy mother – so Jesus often reminded the apostles how to love and how to serve. And that is the key of our Christian life – that we are called to serve. It is why ambition amongst clergy is wrong. It is why the frequent boasting of a parish as “important” is wrong. It is why jostling amongst Christians for power and privilege is wrong. It is why we have our Gospel reading for today – so that Jesus can remind us of our calling: “whoever wishes to be great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be your slave; just as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many.”

Last week I mentioned my recent retreat in Devon and how I spent time in the beautiful small 15th century stone chapel called ‘The Chapel of Christ the Servant’ vividly helped to remind me of my calling, our calling, to be servants. When first ordained, all men and women spend a year as a deacon – learning the task of servant ministry. During this year the stole is worn over the shoulder, just like a towel – a reminder of the towel used by Jesus to wash his disciples’ feet at the Last Supper – a task which would normally be carried out by servants. But Jesus reminded them and he reminds us that he, the Son of Man, came “not to be served but to be the servant of others”. One other place I love is the Chapel at Wychcroft, the Southwark Diocesan Retreat House. The Chapel is dedicated to the People of God and a large and powerful icon-like painting on a Cross-shaped panel entitled “Christ the Worker” towers over the altar. It is striking – a stunning image of Christ with his hands stretched out and wearing an apron. Christ the Worker, the Servant.

So today, my hope and prayer today is that, whatever storms may afflict the Church, and in particular the Church of England, we should remain firmly resolute, faithful, prayerful and loving – always ready to serve in whatever way we feel called.

I finish with a quote – not from the Bible but from the poet Wordsworth who said:

“That best portion of a good person’s life are the little nameless, unremembered acts of kindness and love”.

Jesus of Nazareth, and St James too, would surely say “Amen” to that. And so should we. Amen.