

Sermon for Seventeenth after Trinity, 2021

Isaiah 44:6-8. 1 Corinthians 3:10-15. Psalm 40:1-6.
Matthew 7:21-29.

The Collect: God, who knows us to be set in the midst of so many and great dangers that by reason of the frailty of our nature we cannot always stand upright, grant us such strength and protection as may support us in all dangers, and carry us through all temptations; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, Amen.

Matthew 7:29 'And when Jesus had finished these sayings, the crowds were astonished at his teaching, for he taught them as one who had authority, and not as the scribes.'

A friend of mine recommended a programme called: 'Would I lie to you?' I saw a snippet. It involves telling a story and the rest of the panel guessing whether it is true or false. Of course, this is a format that has been pleasing audiences of radio and screen for years. Not only is it on screen, but also it features in countless real-life situations at home and work. 'Did you eat all the chocolate cake I made for your brother's birthday?' 'Your CV says you have all the requirements and experience we ask for this job in the Fish Restaurant. By the way, when were you consecrated as Archbishop of Saundersfoot?' Well might we pray: 'by reason of the frailty of our nature we cannot always stand upright.' I love to watch a programme called 'Faking it! - tears of a crime' in which three experts analyse the speech and body language of actual criminals being interviewed on videotape by the police. It is fascinating to watch the micro-signals of deception. They leak information with the slightest tilt of an eyebrow.

Science shows that the general public may or may not be gullible!! They can often tell when someone is trying to deceive them, or 'pull a fast one.' But, not always. There is a crowd effect that can override someone's better judgement; e.g. when someone fears that they will become a target if they don't go along with the rest of the group caught up in a riot. So we have a toxic mix of deception, deliberate or contrived, with psycho-social pressure to conform; and a barely thought-out hope that the truth will not emerge or come back to demand satisfaction.

The prophet Isaiah warns the people that they have been deceived and that the only Lord, King and Redeemer is the Lord of Hosts: first and last. God challenges anyone who would rival him, to prove how they can. St Paul has no false humility, but a gift of grace, when he tells the Corinthians that he laid his teachings like a master-builder on the foundation of Christ. Anyone trying to build their own edifice will be tested by fire on Judgement Day to see whether they have built worthily. Jesus warns people that even though they call him 'Lord, Lord,' not all of them will enter the kingdom of heaven. Even evildoers can call him Lord. If they think they can build their own edifice on sand, this will collapse under testing conditions. The true God has authority to judge.

Every so often, frequently in fact, another person tries to teach their own 'gospel'. History is littered with new religions. It always will be until the Day of Judgement shows them up for what they are. I could name several of them, but won't prolong the sermon by so doing. Suffice it to say that humans will find any excuse to feel better about themselves and to take advantage of others.

That is what our Collect calls ‘the frailty of our nature.’ There’s a perfume advert on TV in which an assortment of curious individuals declare themselves to be perfect. It is one step further than the advert that told us to spend money on cosmetics ‘because you’re worth it.’ Advertising agencies exploit the basest instincts of potential customers with half-truths and ego-massaging artistry. If no-one authorises you, authorise yourself!

Jesus’ teaching, and the reaction of His followers, run counter to this human predisposition for an easy, self-affirming, fix. Many of the Jesus’ listeners discerned the difference between a rabbinic interpretation of the Torah, and real authority. In mainstream Judaism of the Pharisees and Sadducees, there was no attempt to recruit Gentiles to follow the Torah. Nor was there a drive to get people into the synagogue or to visit the Temple. The Law could speak for itself. Some sects, such as the Zealots, were more intolerant of people they thought transgressed the Law; but they were few in number. It was in some ways parallel to Afghanistan under the Taliban; where the population may acquiesce to Sharia law rather than insist on secular jurisprudence. In the East, authority is invested in elders, not questioning their right to be obeyed. If people are able to fulfil most of the needs of daily living, they might fight for an alternative leader, but they won’t fight for an alternative system. Still, to this day, Judaism claims to avoid proselytising, though in some cities there are some ultra-orthodox followers of individual rabbinic sects who do want the less observant to knuckle under. These modern-day Hasidim don’t have a lifeless adherence to practice alone, but also feel deeply attracted to a spiritual experience of the divine. But, in the main, the Scribes of Jesus’ time were concerned to preserve religious observance in society. What they lacked was authenticity of a relationship with the source of the written code. The people listening to Jesus’ teaching saw there was a difference between Him and their teachers. That difference was summed up in the word ‘authority.’ Jesus embodied and exuded the Law.

Brothers and sisters, our religion can be frail, but our faith must be robust. When God’s grace allows us to see the difference between a Christian and a Churchgoer, then we will begin to be true witnesses to the Sovereignty of God, speak with authority about the Resurrection of Christ, and demonstrate by our testimony the price He paid to be our Saviour. Simply liking religion, and being superficially sincere, is not the mark of a Christian who has been born again. Jesus said we **must** be born again, to enter the Kingdom of God. He didn’t say, read the book, say the catechism, do all the right religious things, and you will get a free pass to Heaven. The Scribes can say that, and there is truth in it. But it is not the authentic gospel. Prisons and psychiatric hospitals are full of religious people who are either deluded or have transgressed God’s commandments; sometimes spectacularly and destructively. Churches have a good number of scribes and deluded adherents of a dead letter too. To *know about* religion is not enough to qualify one for heaven, nor to assure one of God’s love and forgiveness.

Don’t seek religion through man’s efforts alone; but do invite the Holy Spirit to minister His grace into your mind and heart. Surrendering these to God will trigger a profound reaction. The Holy Spirit speaks with authority. As the Psalmist says 40:3,4 ‘He hath put a new song in my mouth: even a thanksgiving unto our God. Many shall see it and fear: and shall put their trust in the Lord.’

In the name of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.