

Merrylea Parish Church, Glasgow.

Pastoral Homily by the Locum, the Reverend Jim Gibson.

Sunday, 19th July 2020

Sixth Sunday after Trinity.

“Do not judge others and God will not judge you; do not condemn others and God will not condemn you; forgive others, and God will forgive you. Give to others, and God will give to you. Indeed, you will receive a full measure, a generous helping, poured into your hands – all that you can hold. The measure you use for others is the one that God will use for you.” (St Luke 6: 37, 38).

This week, I had the honour to conduct the funeral of a member of my last congregation. In the crematorium, after the prayer of committal, we listened to a recording of the hymn *Amazing Grace*. It was sung by the late American gospel singer, Mahalia Jackson. Perhaps not my favourite hymn, nevertheless, sung by the former *‘Queen of gospel’* it was a truly captivating moment, utterly beautiful. During her singing career Jackson, a prominent civil rights activist, used the music of the Church to powerful effect. *“I sing God’s music because it makes me feel free”*, she said. Many of her spirituals came from the Psalms and, particularly, from passages that lament the conditions of slavery into which the people of Israel were taken. Jackson sang at the funeral of Martin Luther King where Harry Belafonte called her *‘the single most powerful woman in the United States’*.

As I listened to the recording, I realised that the opening words are such a direct and powerful statement of the Christian doctrine of forgiveness. *Amazing Grace, how sweet the sound That saved a wretch like me. I once was lost, but now am found; Was blind, but now I see.*

In 2007, down a small alley in the City of London, Archbishop Desmond Tutu unveiled a sculpture. Its purpose was to remember and acknowledge the evils of the transatlantic slave trade. The site was chosen because it is where John Newton had his parish church. Newton was the author of the hymn *Amazing Grace* and Newton was a slaver. He captained slave ships trafficking his human cargo to a life of abject misery and servitude. Perhaps the hymn is so extraordinarily powerful because it was written by a man with such a shameful past. It assures us, whose sins do not add up to anything like Newton’s, of Jesus’ promise that we are not eternally imprisoned by things we may have done wrong in our lives. Forgiveness is always possible.

Contrast this with the moral consciousness being paraded by activists within our society.

It is called *‘Cancel Culture’*. I find it quite frightening and a serious challenge to our democracy. It is an extreme form of puritan righteousness that leaves no room for the possibility of forgiveness upon which the teaching of Jesus was founded. I find it as distasteful as I believe it persecutory. How can we, as individuals, confront the various forms of racism, sexism - and the multitude of phobias we all harbour within - if the consequences of doing so only opens us up to the eternal damnation handed out by the high court of self-righteous vigilantism and spread by gutter parts of social media and graffiti spraying, monument destroying perpetrators. From their judgement there is no pardon.

After John Newton became an Anglican clergyman he eventually exerted considerable and positive influence over William Wilberforce and the abolitionist movement. Interestingly, the base of the sculpture, off Fenchurch Street, is quite ambiguous. It can either be understood as the pulpit from which Newton preached his sermons against slavery, or as a slave auctioneer’s podium. It stands as a voiceless yet powerful sermon

reminding all who view it that human nature is a complex and multi-faceted phenomenon. Rarely should its outward appearance and manifestations be simply taken as read.

There are many statues whose demise I would not miss; and who among us did not cheer when that statue of Saddam Hussein hit the ground in Baghdad? But without some sort of personal redemption ever being possible, those of us who may recognise ourselves, at some reflective moment, as '*a wretch*', will eventually have to learn to nervously look over our shoulder in case the day should come when, in whatever guise, tomorrow's puritan fascists come after us too.

Prayer:

Loving God, you offer us no hiding place from the world of reality. Your kingdom is a sanctuary for those on life's journey where you warm us with shared experience and kindle in us a passion to struggle against cruelty, exclusion and oppression. The wings of your love lift us high with hope and laughter. Soaring above loneliness and pain, we are offered a glimpse of what might be. As we slowly escape restrictions placed upon us may we grow confidently into our new ways of meeting, and shopping, and worshipping.

Help us to see that beloved traditions can still survive to be our guide for whatever uncertainties the future may hold. Forgive our shortcomings and raise our vision to encompass new possibilities in our everyday. Knowing ourselves much loved, may we love much, rejoicing in the care of family and of friends. Comfort those distressed in mind, body or spirit and be close to the dying and all who mourn. For all in the front line defending us from the spread of Covid-19, we pray; and for all striving towards the discovery of a much needed vaccine. May they find success in their task so that people everywhere may live life to the full. God of love and grace, thank you for your mercy, grace and graciousness.

Our Father in heaven. Hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come. Your will be done on earth as in heaven. Give us today our daily bread. Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us. Do not bring us to the time of trial, but deliver us from evil. For the kingdom, the power and the glory are yours. Now and forever. AMEN.