

Sermon for Sunday 14 August 2022 – The Ninth Sunday after Trinity

Very Revd Philip Buckler

Jeremiah 23.23-29; Hebrews 11.29–12.2; Luke 12.49-56

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

'Since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses'; so wrote the author of our second reading from the letter to the Hebrews, as he concludes his great hymn to faith. Recalling the heroes of the Old Testament. Their faith, both in good times and in bad times, is an example to us all. I used to think of this in my last cathedral, where every day at Evensong we would read from a book of obits the names of those members of the cathedral foundation who had died on that particular date. It stretched back to the year 1072, when the cathedral at Lincoln was established by order of William the Conqueror.

The list of names ranging over those centuries included many historical figures, such as Cardinal Wolsey, one of my predecessors as dean, numerous archbishops, even one of the cathedral prebendaries, who became Pope in pre-Reformation times. Other figures, such as the poet priest George Herbert, struck a familiar chord. But of course, there were many of the cathedral's family across the ages who, although unknown today, were still remembered as part of that cloud of witnesses that surrounded us. So, day by day, at the end of Evensong, we might read, for example, of X, Prebendary of Such and Such a Place, later Bishop of Wherever, who died in 1273, Y, Prebendary of Elsewhere and Sub-dean, who died in 1726, and Z, the cathedral clockwinder, who died in 1954.

Then we would recite the foundation prayer that was laid down by St Hugh of Lincoln in 1190 or thereabouts. That remembrance had gone on down the centuries. But it not only reminded us of that continuing stream of worship to which our offering that particular day was being added, but also it recalled for us those who had lived through times of great turbulence in the life of the Christian family. We sometimes think that today the church is in a great division and all sorts of issues going on, but it's as nothing to what it was in centuries past, where we found people sometimes killing for their faith, sometimes dying for their faith. Our task was, and is, to live for our faith, but recognising also the lessons of history and realising that God is so much greater than we can ever imagine at any one point in history, or then, or now.

There is an alternative collect sometimes used for this Sunday, 9th after Trinity, which goes thus: it prays to God, 'revive your church in our day and make her holy, strong and faithful'. Well we can always do with being revived, having our life renewed afresh. But we need to be careful to recognise for what we are asking - holy, strong, faithful. To be holy means to be set apart or dedicated to God. But it doesn't mean a church so wrapped up in itself that it cannot serve the world where all are God's children and our brothers and sisters. We pray for the Church to be strong, but not with the appearance of strength that comes from closed minds or mass movements. Such strength is brittle and can shatter. To judge the Church on numerical terms may suggest success in human ways of thinking. But God's ways are different.

I often think of a comment made by one of my colleagues who pointed out that Christians have prayed continually to God for his church, and what he has given us is you and me. This is what God has chosen to give his church. Our job is to serve Him in **his** strength rather than our own. Throughout the history of faith, God has often relied not on numbers but on a remnant of faithful few.

So we pray that Christ's church might be faithful, but that's not to be measured by the amount of doctrine we can believe, but rather the trust we place in God rather than in ourselves. It's in the small things done sincerely, day by day, in serving others rather than ourselves, that our faithfulness may be seen. I recall the grandfather of one of our choristers who would often come to choral evensong sung six days out of seven each week, and he expressed amazement at the formality and reverence with which each service was conducted, even though there may only perhaps be a handful of people present. I had to explain that what we were doing was to the glory of God, not for those who happened to be there. We had to offer the best we could because that was our work as a cathedral. We were endeavouring to be faithful to our calling. Just as a parish church strives to work out what it can offer God week by week or day by day. It depends not on the numbers who come, that's not what worship is about; instead, all, anyone who comes, after all, are welcome to make this offering their own, but it depends instead upon faithfulness to God and our response to all that he has given to us.

In our Gospel reading this morning, Jesus spoke of bringing a fire to the earth, an energy that would challenge and transform the norms of human society. Patterns upon which we rely would be turned upside down. Our ability to predict much in our world is often lacking when it comes to recognising the things of God.

If we would be true to our calling as Christ's Church today, we need that holiness displayed in Jesus who came to be one with us, that we might be one with Him. It's to rely upon the strength that comes from God's grace and mercy rather than our own power. It's to be faithful in the small as well as the great things of life, trusting to God to work his purposes in our lives. So we can look around this church, or any church, and find memorials to those who've gone before us in such a place. You and I can look to those who've been around us in our own lives and who have influenced us for good. We can all look to the patriarchs, prophets and saints of every age and we hear anew those words, 'Since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and sin, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of our faith.

Amen.