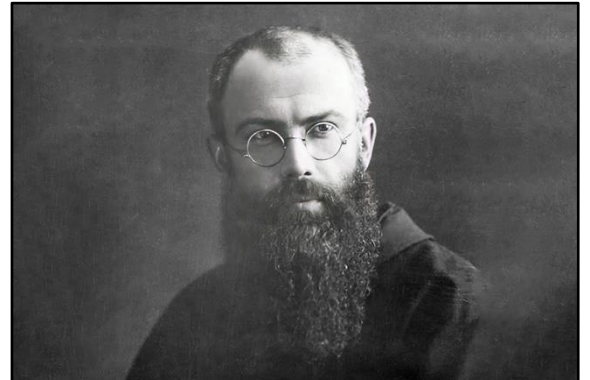


Trinity 9

I wonder if any of you recognise this man? That older ones among you might have a better chance. This is Maximilian Kolbe. He was a Franciscan priest in Poland during the second world war. In 1939 as the Nazis approached Poland, he sent most of his Friars away but he stayed behind and his Monastery became a hospital for wounded soldiers. Despite the Nazi's surrounding the Monastery, Father Kolbe continued to be openly critical of them and so inevitably on February 17, 1941, he was arrested and sent to Auschwitz.



One day a prisoner escaped from the camp, and to teach the remaining prisoners a lesson, 10 men were selected to be starved to death. When one of the selected men, cried out, "My wife! My children!" Kolbe volunteered to take his place. He was placed with the others in an underground bunker, but rather than wallowing in despair, he spent his time ministering to the others and singing hymns, until he died on 14th August 1941. It's an incredible story, a story of courage and self-sacrifice. Maximilian Kolbe gave up his freedom and his life for his love of Jesus. Sadly 80 years on, violence and death are still suffered by Christians around the world. Here in the UK, thankfully we have religious freedom, but that doesn't mean that people don't still suffer the consequences of speaking up for what they believe. You may have seen the vicar on the news recently, 83 year old Reverend Sue Parfitt, who was arrested at a Palestine Action rally. Whatever our thoughts on that particular group, Reverend Sue was content to be arrested for her beliefs and what she believed was right.

I've certainly never been arrested, but I was involved in a climate protest during my curacy. I have to say it was one of the most stressful things I've ever done. We all met in the city centre – that bit was OK. But after that me and a group of other clergy planned a lie-down protest in various places around

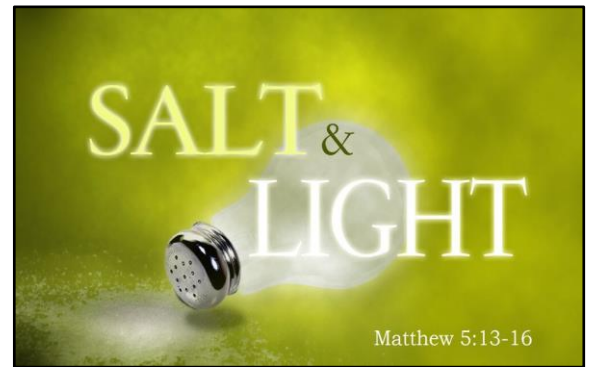


Wolverhampton. We targeted companies who we felt were particularly bad offenders, in terms of tackling climate change. We dropped dead in the foyer of Wolverhampton Council Offices. Well I say 'we', actually everyone else dropped dead, leaving muggins here to talk to the very cross security guards. We dropped dead in the big Asda by the Molineaux. It was incredible the abuse we got from the shoppers, 'You're vicars, you should be ashamed of yourself!' The security guard was very cross. I didn't dare go shopping there for about 2 years after in case they recognised me! Lastly, and perhaps most riskily, we dropped dead in Lloyds bank. That, I think was the nearest we got to being arrested! The bank manager just didn't seem to be in a talking mood. Anyway, that was certainly the most uncomfortable experience I've ever had of standing up for my faith. And yet, a bit of verbal abuse and a threat of arrest is nothing compared to what many Christians face and have faced throughout history.

Today's readings speak really clearly about the call as Christians to stand up for what we believe, but also the cost. In today's reading from Hebrews, we are given a long list of faith heroes. We read of amazing feats, conquering kingdoms, parting seas, defeating lions, but then the list takes a troubling turn. There's torture, flogging, chains, execution. One look at the Old Testament reveals so many people mistreated, persecuted, martyred for their beliefs. Pretty much every prophet came to a grisly end. And sadly, the persecution didn't stop there. The book of Hebrews was likely written to encourage Christian communities in Rome undergoing persecution. When we look at today's Gospel reading, I guess this comes as no surprise. Jesus warns his disciples that the race will be hard. Jesus' will challenge the status quo, he'll force

people to take sides. Jesus' ministry will bring division, opposition, persecution and for his followers, the same is promised.

As Christians, we simply can't camouflage ourselves. God's kingdom values are completely countercultural today, we're not supposed to blend in. Jesus calls every Christian, every Church to be salt and light, to be prophetic, to stand up for our beliefs, to stand up and speak up for his Kingdom values, to let Jesus' light shine, to let his flavour season every place we go. But it's not easy. As Jesus warned, standing up for what we believe can bring division, in our families, perhaps at work, with our friends. It's something we've spoken about a few times in the Start and



Moving On courses, how people around us receive the news that we're now Christian. Inevitably once Holy Spirit gets to work in us, we start to change. We're still us, but we start to develop different values, different priorities. We start to see the world, the news, people in a different way. It's tempting to want to camouflage ourselves, to save the Christian bit of us for Sundays when we're surrounded by like-minded people, but we're called to let our light shine.

Now that's not saying we should ram Jesus down people's throats, or walk around thinking that we are holier than thou. Someone here last week was accosted by a woman in the park, who then spent half an hour ramming her particular Christian values down her throat. Even if those beliefs had been well founded, verbally attacking people in a park is unlikely to lead to a change of heart and mind! As Christians, we're simply called to stand up and be counted, remembering that those we speak to are God's children too. Salt adds flavour, light illuminates the path for others, it doesn't mug them and frogmarch them down the path!

As Christians, we are to live with integrity, not compromising our beliefs or values, sharing our salt and light, whatever opposition we face. But it's not just about us as individuals. I think it can seem just as hard for us, as churches, to really be prophetic, to stand up for what we believe in. The Church of England is losing popularity, surely being too vocal, making too much of a nuisance of ourselves, will only make us more unpopular. We're trying to attract people, not scare them away. Well I guess that's a risk we take. But actually, I think, when the church stands up, speaks out about contemporary issues, issues which concern so many people today, it's then it becomes real. It's then it becomes really relevant and we create not opposition but interest.

Of course, it's not just about what we say. What we do, says just as much about who we are, who Jesus is. Everything we say and do says something about what we believe in or what matters to us. So, as a church, we need to be constantly reflecting on our life here, on the message we're sending, the values we're reflecting, the community we're serving.

Being a prophetic presence can be tough, it can be a hard race we run, at other times it can bring huge blessing. But whatever the race set before us, we never race alone. So many have run before us, so many run with us and with our eyes fixed on Jesus, no matter how tough the course, what opposition we face, we run with perseverance, we keep our eyes on the prize and we will finish the race. Amen.

Rev'd Ros Wilshire