



Sunday, 28 June, 2020

Trinity 3

When we celebrated St David's centenary on 1 March, I could not have imagined that it would be the last act of public worship in which I participated in this country. The next day I flew to Lima in what seemed like normal circumstances. Making a hasty, early return eleven days later, I arrived back in a country and a world transformed, paralysed by fear. For more than three months, we have existed purely to avoid death, deprived even of the comfort of sharing our faith with others in church. It has been a long and difficult period of isolation and separation, but we now have cause to hope that we are on the road to recovery. While I must urge caution, for there is a long way still to go, we can at last think about resuming our life of corporate worship.

Earlier this week, it was announced that public worship could resume in churches from 5 July, if it is safe to do so. The full guidelines have not been issued, but it is clear that we will not be permitted to sing for the foreseeable future, nor will post-service coffee be allowed. Weddings will be limited to thirty people, but there is no limit for other services beyond what the building can handle with individuals or family groups separated by a distance of at least 1 metre (3.3 feet). There is a lot to be done and to consider in the process of reopening and we must not rush into things hastily. Sarah and I have a responsibility to ensure that all necessary measures are in place and to ensure safety. For that reason, the process of reopening the Group churches will be staggered. All being well, worship will resume on 5 July, but not everywhere or in familiar form. Once full guidelines have been issued, we will take the final decisions and circulate details of services for July. Bear in mind that July

and August will certainly not be 'normal' months. What we do across the next nine weeks will be a temporary pattern. Circumstances may change rapidly in that time, so we will review things towards the end of August. Above all, please be patient. It is far better for us to ease back in than to risk a second lockdown. Safety and responsibility are paramount.

I hope that as many of you as possible will feel able to return to church itself once services resume. However, some may need to continue shielding, while others may feel uncomfortable with such gatherings at this stage. We will continue to issue these pew sheets throughout July, to ensure everyone is kept in touch, then reassess at the end of the month. More about this will come properly at a later stage, but Sarah and I would like to express our heartfelt thanks to the group who have been delivering pew sheets and magazines each week and helping make this possible. We have both been grateful for the appreciative comments so many of you have taken the time to make about this endeavour.

It is not, as Churchill once said, the end, nor is it the beginning of the end, but it is perhaps the end of the beginning. Let us hope that we can soon be together once more.

Phil

Collect and Readings for the Third Sunday after Trinity

Almighty God, you have broken the tyranny of sin
and have sent the Spirit of your Son into our hearts
whereby we call you Father:
give us grace to dedicate our freedom to your service,
that we and all creation may be brought
to the glorious liberty of the children of God;
through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord,
who is alive and reigns with you,
in the unity of the Holy Spirit
one God, now and for ever.

Amen.

First Reading (Genesis 22:1-14)

After these things God tested Abraham. He said to him, ‘Abraham!’ And he said, ‘Here I am.’ He said, ‘Take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt-offering on one of the mountains that I shall show you.’ So Abraham rose early in the morning, saddled his donkey, and took two of his young men with him, and his son Isaac; he cut the wood for the burnt-offering, and set out and went to the place in the distance that God had shown him. On the third day Abraham looked up and saw the place far away. Then Abraham said to his young men, ‘Stay here with the donkey; the boy and I will go over there; we will worship, and then we will come back to you.’ Abraham took the wood of the burnt-offering and laid it on his son Isaac, and he himself carried the fire and the knife. So the two of them walked on together. Isaac said to his father Abraham, ‘Father!’ And he said, ‘Here I am, my son.’ He said, ‘The fire and the wood are here, but where is the lamb for a burnt-offering?’ Abraham said, ‘God himself will provide

the lamb for a burnt-offering, my son.’ So the two of them walked on together.

When they came to the place that God had shown him, Abraham built an altar there and laid the wood in order. He bound his son Isaac, and laid him on the altar, on top of the wood. Then Abraham reached out his hand and took the knife to kill his son. But the angel of the Lord called to him from heaven, and said, ‘Abraham, Abraham!’ And he said, ‘Here I am.’ He said, ‘Do not lay your hand on the boy or do anything to him; for now I know that you fear God, since you have not withheld your son, your only son, from me.’ And Abraham looked up and saw a ram, caught in a thicket by its horns. Abraham went and took the ram and offered it up as a burnt-offering instead of his son. So Abraham called that place ‘The Lord will provide’; as it is said to this day, ‘On the mount of the Lord it shall be provided.’

Second Reading (Romans 6:12-end)

Therefore, do not let sin exercise dominion in your mortal bodies, to make you obey their passions. No longer present your members to sin as instruments of wickedness, but present yourselves to God as those who have been brought from death to life, and present your members to God as instruments of righteousness. For sin will have no dominion over you, since you are not under law but under grace.

What then? Should we sin because we are not under law but under grace? By no means! Do you not know that if you present yourselves to anyone as obedient slaves, you are slaves of the one whom you obey, either of sin, which leads to death, or of obedience, which leads to righteousness? But thanks be to God that you, having once been slaves of sin, have become obedient from the heart to the form of teaching to which you were entrusted, and that you, having been set free from sin, have become slaves of righteousness. I am speaking in human terms

because of your natural limitations. For just as you once presented your members as slaves to impurity and to greater and greater iniquity, so now present your members as slaves to righteousness for sanctification. When you were slaves of sin, you were free in regard to righteousness. So what advantage did you then get from the things of which you now are ashamed? The end of those things is death. But now that you have been freed from sin and enslaved to God, the advantage you get is sanctification. The end is eternal life. For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Gospel Reading (Matthew 10:40-end)

Jesus said, ‘Whoever welcomes you welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me. Whoever welcomes a prophet in the name of a prophet will receive a prophet’s reward; and whoever welcomes a righteous person in the name of a righteous person will receive the reward of the righteous; and whoever gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones in the name of a disciple—truly I tell you, none of these will lose their reward.’

Reflection for the Third Sunday after Trinity

Phil Bradford

Addressing the House of Commons in 1948, Winston Churchill suggested leaving the past to history, on the grounds that ‘I propose to write that history myself’. He did just that, which means that ever since the received popular narrative of the 1930s has effectively been the Churchillian one, with the capricious, serial changer of parties as the hero and his opponents on the government front benches the villains. Neville Chamberlain has borne the brunt of criticism across the years, but obloquy has also attached to his two immediate predecessors who between them occupied Downing Street alternately from 1923 to 1937. It is Churchill’s partial, self-serving ‘history’ (along with the equally partial, self-serving efforts of Labour figures like Michael Foot) which has made such a controversial figure of Stanley Baldwin, Worcestershire’s very own, three-time prime minister. The Bewdley MP is viewed through the distorting lens of World War II, aided by Churchillian propaganda, and criticised for not responding to the threat of Hitler and rearming more urgently. There are valid questions and criticisms, but too often the benefit of hindsight intervenes. Baldwin faced the problem that many in high places (including Edward VIII, whose throne Churchill tried so hard to save, and even such unlikely men as David Lloyd George) admired Hitler in the mid-1930s. More seriously, Britain in the 1930s was still deeply scarred by the legacy of World War I, which had brought very personal pain into the heart of government: Asquith had lost a son in combat, Bonar Law two. Britain in the mid-thirties still had too recent memories of the last conflict to want another. While in a post-Holocaust world we might ask why more was not done before 1939, we need to remember that this is very much using hindsight in the most unfair way to judge. Castigated as one of the ‘guilty men’, few now remember Baldwin’s domestic achievements, such as his successful handling of the

General Strike (1926) or the Abdication Crisis (1936). Moreover, Baldwin was one of the most amiable and honourable men ever to hold the premiership, his integrity in sharp contrast to more recent holders of the office. He attacked an idea he opposed, never (with one notable exception in 1922) the person suggesting it. He had the humility to serve as a deputy to MacDonald in the National Government in 1931-35, despite leading the largest party, something inconceivable today. During World War I, he gave around a quarter of his personal fortune to help with the national debt, a notion probably incomprehensible to his successor of 2020 who thinks nothing of spending hundreds of thousands of pounds of taxpayers money to rebrand and repaint his plane. He accepted his eldest son becoming a Labour MP and (at a time when homosexuality was illegal) he and his wife Lucy accepted that son's male partner as part of the family. As is probably clear, I have always admired Baldwin. However, reading about him once again, I was struck by an aspect which was entirely omitted when I last studied the period in detail twenty years ago: his faith. The most recent biography devotes a whole chapter to his faith and religion, extremely unusual in the biography of any twentieth-century PM. It was fascinating to read of how Baldwin prayed as a quite natural part of his strategy for contemplating problems, how he and his wife began each day at Downing Street or Chequers kneeling in prayer to commend the day to God. When he first entered Number 10, he told a journalist, 'I need your prayers more than your congratulations'. In particular, a quotation from one of his 1931 speeches resonated: 'We need not proclaim our religious convictions at every street corner. What matters is that religion should sway our motives, sustain our principles, surround and bathe our spirits like a secret atmosphere as we go about our work.'

It is interesting to re-examine Stanley Baldwin's life from that perspective, but I think that it also stands as one of the most concisely eloquent statements of the interplay between faith and life that I have yet read. I have never been an advocate of the 'hellfire on the high street' version of Christianity, standing and screaming at passers-by that they are going to burn in hell; it turns me off Christianity (it is, indeed, not a Christianity I recognise or subscribe to), so I dread to think what it does to others. By far the best advocates for Christianity I have encountered are not those who loudly proclaim the faith, but those who quietly live it, for whom it so obviously suffuses their existence in the way Baldwin described. True faith is not saying the words loudly and repeatedly, any more than it is undertaking ostentatious deeds of piety. It is rather something which underpins and informs our very existence. Faith is not simply belief divorced from our existence, any more than it is simply social action. As the letter of James reminds us powerfully, faith and deeds interact in complex ways, neither sufficient in itself. And the deeds are faith are not necessarily ostentatious or visible to the world; just reflect on the basic human kindness which comes instinctively to many people on account of their faith, unrecognised by the wider world or honours but a clear example of a faith lived and known to God.

It is this tension between faith and deeds which underpins today's reading from Genesis. In a Bible bursting with unpleasant and unpalatable incidents, I have always found the sacrifice of Isaac and its traditional interpretation one of the very worst. Normally, Abraham is praised for his faith and obedience, being prepared to sacrifice the life of his son at God's demand. For me, there is nothing praiseworthy in this enormously troubling episode of ritualised child murder, even if it stops short of the gruesome ending anticipated. A God who demands the slaying of an innocent boy is a sadistic tyrant, not a God of love. A father

who would make that sacrifice strikes me as an appalling example, not a paragon of faith. It seems incomprehensible that over the centuries, interpreters and preachers have boldly proclaimed this as an act in Abraham's favour, a demonstration of his faith. It is in every sense sadistic, obscene, repulsive. There can be no heroes in the story recounted this way, only villains, with God's barbaric demand surely enough to turn any reasonable person from faith.

Yet as ever, there is far more going on than the typically facile readings would have us believe. If we reverse everything, it makes more sense. There is a Jewish interpretation of this story which holds that Abraham failed the test spectacularly. Remember the role of argument in Judaism, how Abraham himself bargained with God in an effort to save Sodom. Why, then, does he not do this now, when the life of his son is at stake? In the alternative interpretation, when God demanded the sacrifice, Abraham's response should have been something along the lines of, 'no way'. To meekly accept the command, to get so far as holding the knife aloft with which to commit the deed, was the greatest failure conceivable. God had to intervene to save Abraham from himself, to reverse a situation which should never have reached this stage. The demand was incompatible with the nature of God, which Abraham should have realised. The essence of the test was that God does not require slavish obedience, that we prove our fidelity with dramatic deeds, no matter how ridiculous or inhuman. Sometimes, when the demand does not accord with what we know of the nature of God, then the voice is not God's. It is why every crusader and religious terrorist is entirely wrong: God does not demand or condone murder in any form, let alone in his name.

To genuinely demonstrate his faith, Abraham should have refused outright. This would have shown true faith in the God who had granted him his miraculous son, in a God of compassion who had promised Abraham's descendants would be more numerous than the stars. And it should take us back to Baldwin's idea, to remember that faith is not proved in one moment of mad action, but rather in a lifetime where living is informed constantly by that faith. A mature faith does not necessarily provide us with ready answers to every single scenario, rather it equips us to pray and tackle situations in accordance with what we have learned of God's nature.

St Peter

29 June

29 June can be celebrated as Peter and Paul, or Peter alone. Given that Paul already has his own feast day (the Conversion of Paul on 25 January), I always prefer to give this day to Peter. The apostle needs no introduction. However, Petertide is traditionally a time for ordinations. In the unusual circumstances of this year, please pray today for all those preparing for ministry, especially those who were due to be ordained deacon or priest this week but have had the service postponed.

Almighty God, who inspired your apostle Saint Peter to confess Jesus as Christ and Son of the living God:
build up your Church upon this rock,
that in unity and peace it may proclaim one truth
and follow one Lord, your Son our Saviour Christ,
who is alive and reigns with you,
in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
one God, now and for ever.
Amen.

First Reading (Acts 12:1-11)

About that time King Herod laid violent hands upon some who belonged to the church. He had James, the brother of John, killed with the sword. After he saw that it pleased the Jews, he proceeded to arrest Peter also. (This was during the festival of Unleavened Bread.) When he had seized him, he put him in prison and handed him over to four squads of soldiers to guard him, intending to bring him out to the people after the Passover. While Peter was kept in prison, the church prayed fervently to God for him.

The very night before Herod was going to bring him out, Peter, bound with two chains, was sleeping between two soldiers, while guards in front of the door were keeping watch over the prison. Suddenly an angel of the Lord appeared and a light shone in the cell. He tapped Peter on the side and woke him, saying, ‘Get up quickly.’ And the chains fell off his wrists. The angel said to him, ‘Fasten your belt and put on your sandals.’ He did so. Then he said to him, ‘Wrap your cloak around you and follow me.’ Peter went out and followed him; he did not realize that what was happening with the angel’s help was real; he thought he was seeing a vision. After they had passed the first and the second guard, they came before the iron gate leading into the city. It opened for them of its own accord, and they went outside and walked along a lane, when suddenly the angel left him. Then Peter came to himself and said, ‘Now I am sure that the Lord has sent his angel and rescued me from the hands of Herod and from all that the Jewish people were expecting.’

Second Reading (Matthew 16:13-19)

Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, ‘Who do people say that the Son of Man is?’ And they said, ‘Some say John the Baptist, but others Elijah, and still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets.’ He said to them, ‘But who do you say that I am?’ Simon Peter answered, ‘You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.’ And Jesus answered him, ‘Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven. And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.’

St Thomas

3 July

Those using the BCP lectionary must wait until 21 December to celebrate Thomas' feast day, but Common Worship has it today. Again, Thomas needs no introduction, beyond the assertion that the 'doubting' epithet is highly unfair.

Almighty and eternal God,
who, for the firmer foundation of our faith,
allowed your holy apostle Thomas
to doubt the resurrection of your Son
till word and sight convinced him:
grant to us, who have not seen, that we may also believe
and so confess Christ as our Lord and our God;
who is alive and reigns with you,
in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
one God, now and for ever.
Amen.

First Reading (Habakkuk 2:1-4)

I will stand at my watch-post,
and station myself on the rampart;
I will keep watch to see what he will say to me,
and what he will answer concerning my complaint.
Then the Lord answered me and said:
Write the vision;
make it plain on tablets,
so that a runner may read it.
For there is still a vision for the appointed time;
it speaks of the end, and does not lie.
If it seems to tarry, wait for it;

it will surely come, it will not delay.

Look at the proud!

Their spirit is not right in them,
but the righteous live by their faith.

Second Reading (John 20:24-29)

But Thomas (who was called the Twin), one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came. So the other disciples told him, 'We have seen the Lord.' But he said to them, 'Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe.'

A week later his disciples were again in the house, and Thomas was with them. Although the doors were shut, Jesus came and stood among them and said, 'Peace be with you.' Then he said to Thomas, 'Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe.' Thomas answered him, 'My Lord and my God!' Jesus said to him, 'Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.'

Notices

Private Prayer

This week, St John's will be open from 10am to 4pm from Monday 29 June until Friday 3 July inclusive, for individual (or household) private prayer only. It will be closed on Saturday 4 July to allow the church to be prepared for the resumption of public services. St Michael's will be open for private prayer from 10am to 12 noon on Thursday, 2 July. Anyone is welcome to drop in to pray, but please observe the notices about social distancing and hand sanitising.

Resumption of Services

Public worship is allowed to resume in England from 4 July. In the Group, there will be a staggered reopening of churches and a temporary pattern which will last at least for July and August, possibly longer if circumstances dictate. A full plan for July will not be available until the end of this week, once the Church of England has issued the formal guidelines. Please keep an eye on the websites or Facebook for details of services for next Sunday (5 July) and beyond. If you do not have internet access, please feel free to contact one of the clergy for information, although it is best to wait until on or after Friday 3 July as the full situation may not be clear until then.

St Clement's Fundraiser

Weather permitting, there will be a sales table outside St Clement's Church from 10am to 2pm on Saturday 4 July. Everything will be sold on a donations basis so that cash is not handled.

That evening, there will be an online quiz – teams of a maximum of 4 at a cost of £1 per player. Everybody welcome but you will need to be sent a Zoom invitation (contact Sarah for this). At the quiz, I will be drawing

the raffle so don't forget to order your tickets – a bargain at 50p each!

Sarah

Important Numbers

Childline	0800 1111
Samaritans	116 123
Domestic Violence Hotline	0808 2000 247
The Survivors Trust	0808 801 0181
Mind	0300 123 3393
Age UK	0800 169 6565

Resources

A reminder of our online presence. Please especially keep an eye on these this week for news about services and church opening.

St John's Website	www.stjohninbedwardine.co.uk
St Michael's Website	www.stmichaels.westworcesterchurches.org.uk
St John's Facebook	www.facebook.com/stjohninbedwardine
St Michael's Facebook	www.facebook.com/stmichaelsdinesgreen