

Last Week on the Sunday program I heard an interview where the speaker said “It doesn’t matter what your political stance or opinion might be as a Christian providing in the expression of that political view you are sharing the love of God”. I found it a very odd sentence – and one I guess which challenged some of my thinking.

Later on the same day, last Sunday, I read the three readings which were set for today – Isaiah speaking about the tongue of the teacher – or the voice of those who are on God’s side; then James challenging the language which faithful believers may choose to use; then our Gospel as Jesus asks the disciples to give account for how they describe who he is; but also to be careful in their response. Three readings which in many ways highlight the need for compassion and justice in the way that we account for what we believe – maybe even for the way that we share the love of God.

Does it matter then how this language and love is shaped?

I have found this an interesting question to ponder on this week in light of much of the political and social commentary which has been taking place.

The Archbishop of Canterbury has been in the news a lot this week for his comments at the TUC meeting. It has led once again to debates about the right or wrongs of Christians or the Church of England to comment in the public arena. This generally happens when the Archbishop or Church make a comment on any social policy, and is a misunderstanding often of the role of the church – though this is not always the case as we know. Sometimes in the past, and I suspect even now- the Church has got it wrong! But that does not mean the church should stop being a voice of justice in the marketplace, as Jesus called us to be.

On Tuesday Bishop Sarah released a statement across the Diocese which reflected on her first three months and what she has witnessed. She spoke in this letter (of which there are copies if you would like) of the need to be responsible for caring for ourselves and each other so that we can continue to undertake the work of God in this city – and then she moved on to say this...

Over the last four months, I have been out and about across the Diocese, and schools have been just part of my diary. Parishes, homeless hostels, hospitals, food banks, lunch clubs, Sunday and weekday worship – all signs of the hope we have found in Christ Jesus. We should continue to be confident of the hope that we have in Christ, continuing to share that hope in word and action.¹

So what does this confidence in word and action look like? And in light of the readings we have heard today – what does it mean for us here at St Anne’s? This is particularly important today on a day when we enter the public arena in the park

¹ Bishop Sarah Ad Clerum 11th Sept 2018

and are a visible community, within the wider community within which we live.
How do we account for our participation at Queen's Park Day?

How do we account for our involvement at St Anne's when people ask us why we are there?

Are we confident or embarrassed to be the church – or does it depend on the day and who is asking?

How we present in word and action gives a counter narrative to much of the presentation of the church in the media and in popular cultural. Now more than ever we have a responsibility to express why and how the church is part of our lives.

On Thursday afternoon I was at the Whittington hospital talking to one of the porters who was taking the patient I was visiting down for a scan. I said I needed to leave to go back for a work meeting, so I would come with him and hold the doors. He asked what I did and I said I was a priest – “but you look so normal and you are a woman, and you offered to hold the door”?

The picture so many have of the church or priest is not always positive – or most often it doesn't even exist so people at times are shocked to find that we are just normal people who are guided by Christ in the way that we live our lives!

This is what Jesus is trying to help the disciples to understand. It is not enough to just repeat or not answer people's questions about who God is – we have a responsibility to be able to answer the questions that are asked of us – and even more as James explains to those in the early church – we must do this in a way that not only helps people to understand but in no way causes abuse or distraction.

The passage we hear from James is filled with metaphors about teachers, and the way they carry out their craft . Margaret Aymer², professor of New Testament suggests that *James' warning concerns one specific aspect of teaching: how teachers speak, that is, the control teachers have over what they say (3:2). Teachers of James' day gave public discourses to which students and other hearers gathered round. Imagine how easily someone might be led astray by a misplaced or unintended word within that discourse. Yet, who could imagine a teacher than never once misspoke, never once chose an unfortunate word or phrase!*

In the metaphors James uses he speaks about the tongue, in this instant as a driver that controls the direction of a person. What does it mean to think of one's tongue as that which controls one's whole being? Or perhaps, in today's context, what does it mean to think of one's entire being as controlled by what we post on social media?

And yet there is an element of this which is accurate – so much of the way interact with the world and are understood by those around us, is through the language that we use, or the images we promote. The contrast between the James reading with that of the Gospel reading from Mark – is one asks us to consider how we present

² https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=3776

who we are as a people in the way that we teach the message of God, while Mark's Jesus is taking this even further asking us to account for how we understand and represent to ourselves, as well as those who we teach, who Jesus is.

Bishop Sarah at the end of her letter quotes a verse from Ecclesiastes - *I know that whatever God does endures forever; nothing can be added to it, nor anything taken from it; God has done this, so that all should stand in awe before him. (Ecclesiastes 3:14)*

In the end – God is present and we add nothing beyond what is possible in God. But this is not a 'get out of Jail free' card – rather it is a promise – a bond – an insight into the kinds of ways that we might account for our faith, and our understanding of who we are in the public arena.

On Thursday I went to a course called 'Leading Change' – it was a strange session, but one of the things they started with was how we contract together to work as a group. They were talking of course about how you set groups up who might be working to bring about a new project and to ensure that you know what the purpose of the group is, and what rules you have as a group, and how you will know that the job has been done.

It set my brain off on a tangent when it comes to today's readings.

What is the contract – spoken and unspoken – that we have as a church about our purpose, and how we speak to each other, or how we speak to God. How will we know when the job of church has been done?

I suspect unlike a project, we may all have slightly different contracts or ideas about how and why we are church. That means the way that we answers the questions our readings are asking today – may be slightly different – but even if different – I hope they will still at least be on the same page.

When Jesus asks the Disciples 'who am I' Peter can easily answer ' You are the Messiah' – but when Jesus starts explaining to Peter and the others what this might look like – the task it will involve – Peter becomes nervous and discourages Jesus from the journey. Jesus in the end reprimands Peter – get behind me!

Often we can account for why or who – but when it comes to the actually task of doing it is more confronting.

For some of us, sharing why we are church is easy; for other it is very confronting. Yet together we can do it. And I think that is the key to all these questions and readings. Mark reminds us that all that God asks us to do is 'Good News'. It is not always easy or comfortable – but it is still good. And maybe it is that which will inspire us in our interactions today – and always. Amen.