

The Feast of St. Lawrence (Trinity IX) 2020

Romans 10:5-15 / Matt.28:16-end

Why bother with evangelism?

I want to start by reiterating what Brian said last week: reiterating it, before asking a question about it.

Roughly speaking, I think, you could sum up Brian's sermon last week with the words 'Don't Panic.' 'Don't Panic.' You might remember where he started, with the first five verses of Romans 9, where Paul is in great distress about the fact that most of his Jewish friends and family have not become Christians. He is in agony. I could wish myself accursed and cut off from Christ, if only they would believe, he says. I have great sorrow, and unceasing anguish in my heart.

And Brian's message – one, incidentally, with which I wholeheartedly agree – was: Paul, Paul. Remember what you've taught us. Remember what you've just said – said in fact immediately before this great lament. You told us how much God loved us. Who will separate us from the love of God in Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or nakedness, or peril or sword? No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. I am convinced – you said it, Paul – I am convinced that nothing, neither death nor life nor angels nor rulers nor things to come nor powers nor height nor depth nor anything else in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

So Paul, don't panic. Remember what you really know. The God who loves people that much is not going to reject them just because they don't see things the way we do. People aren't saved – whatever that means, as Brian also wondered - by having the right opinion about Jesus, or the right spiritual experience or the right theological beliefs or the right moral standards. They're saved by being loved. They're saved by being loved, and only by being loved. Not by anything they do for themselves – simply, as theological shorthand has it, by grace.

And that, incidentally, if you've ever wondered is the main reason we baptise babies before they know what we're doing, and without worrying too much about whether mum and dad come to church. It's why we'll give a Christian funeral to anyone whose family want it, even if their loved one never darkened the door of church and was of very uncertain belief, and we'll pronounce over them those great words of sure and certain hope – *sure and certain* hope of the resurrection to eternal life. *Sure and certain*. Not dubious, sceptical, grudging or fingers-crossed. Sure and certain. Paul knew this, much of the time. As in Adam all die, he wrote earlier in Romans, so in Christ shall *all* be made alive. *All*. God so loved *the world*, says St. John: and it is the rescue of the world that He is about. His love reaches out to enfold everyone: before they know it, before they can do anything about it, whatever they make of it. That's the Gospel.

Now it raises all sorts of questions, which there isn't time to address this morning. You might rightly wonder, for instance, whether hope really is sure and certain when it comes to the thugs and torturers and killers. Are we really saying Hitler is in Heaven? And never mind Hitler, for most of history the Church has been only too keen to condemn large swathes of the world's population to hell. Even Jesus himself seems to speak quite a bit about damnation, and suggests that it really is possible. So maybe things are a little bit more spiritually risky than Brian and I have seemed to suggest? Genuinely excellent questions, which need proper answers - but on another occasion. I know that sounds like a cop out, but regular listeners will know it is not. Your preacher is from Northern Ireland. Another sermon on hell will be along shortly.

For now though, I want to focus on a different question. If we *are* so confident in the love of God, so sure and certain, so supremely unanxious about eternal destiny – our own, and that of the world – why evangelise at all? Was Paul simply wrong, failing to follow the logic of his own convictions, when he tore around the Middle East and Europe converting people and setting up churches wherever he went? Did Pope Gregory the Great make the same mistake in 597 when he sent Augustine to English shores? What about the first preacher to arrive here and set up the Saxon church that stood before St. Lawrence's? These were all *driven* people, fired by the passion to preach and convert, to make new disciples. But *why*, if it didn't really matter? If, in the end, God loves everyone, if salvation really is sure and certain? Why try to convert people, if they don't really need it?

The question is all the sharper because we know, don't we, that trying to convert people has often been done in the most terrible of ways. People have been bullied into being Christians – sometimes quite literally at gun and sword-point; sometimes through the preaching of fear and hellfire. Then there are the subtler but still morally dubious ways of doing it – the kind of evangelism which relies on everything being slick and shiny and whizzy, which presents Christians as beautiful people filled with wonderful happiness and spiritual joy and never, ever plagued by doubts, which skims over all the difficult questions. Evangelism has been done so terribly, for so long, that it is not surprising most of us, to be frank, have got an instantly negative attitude towards the word.

And yet, we wouldn't be here, if someone hadn't done it. We wouldn't be here, as individuals or as St. Lawrence's Church, if somebody had not evangelised. Had not taken the time and the trouble and the risk of saying that this person, you, needs to hear this message. *Needs to hear it.* And then they did their best to tell us. Evangelism can work. It can be good. We are the living proof of that. And now it falls to us to do it again, so that others can have what we have had.

And what have we had? What is so good, that the natural response must be to want to share it, so others can know it? Not because without it they'll go to Hell, but simply because it is *good*, it is beautiful, it is true? Because knowing it, deep down in your heart as well as in your head, becomes the most precious and life-giving of things? Because it gives you strength to face whatever life throws at you with courage and even, in the most desperate of circumstances, a kind of confidence or even joy? What is this pearl beyond price we have to share with our family, our neighbours?

It is, quite simply, Jesus. I want people to know Jesus. Not because I'm worried that if they don't they're going to hell. They're not. God isn't like that. No, I want them to know Jesus because He shows what human beings can be, what they were made to be. He shows what it is to be on fire with love, fully alive, poured out towards his Father and his neighbour. Around him dead and broken things came alive. Lives were put back together. The world began to sing. I want people to know Jesus because then they'll know that to be human is not just to be the chance product of biology and chemistry, but to be called. To have *a point*, a meaning, a destiny – to know that they're made by love and for love. I want them to know the glory of being human.

And then I want them to know that Jesus does not just reveal that glory, so we can admire it from afar. He is not just an extraordinarily good man, a prophet even, whom we gaze at but can never hope to be. No, I want them to know the Gospel: that the whole point of his coming was to dive into the midst of our failure and death, into our smallness and lostness, so that He could begin to turn it around. I want them to know that whatever mess they make of their lives, whatever disaster they drive themselves into, whatever misery our world drives itself into, nothing ends in defeat because Jesus stays. Jesus stays at the heart of things, breathing in them, making things new, making them new, making them like Him. I want them to know that because of Jesus there is always hope, that the most broken and lost need not be so. I want them to know the story of the great turning around: of Cross and Resurrection. Not because they're doomed if they don't, but because this thing is treasure. The Gospel is life.

Which is why, all those years ago, some preacher came and preached here. And why they built a church here. And why we're here, and why we still preach the same Gospel. Not from fear, not from anxiety: but for the sheer, overwhelming beauty and hope of it. To Jesus Christ, Saviour of the World, be glory now and forever. Amen.