

Sunday after Ascension Day / Last Sunday of Stewardship Campaign / Sunday after Manchester bombing (28th May 2017) Bearing fruit (Psalm 1; Gal.5:16-26; John 15:1-16)

When I chose these readings some weeks ago, I did so with the end of our stewardship campaign in mind. This, you might be glad to hear, is the last Sunday you were going to hear me talking – very much, at any rate – about money. You’ve already heard about the pragmatic reasons for giving – about the hole in the budget, about having to cut things just to break even. You’ve heard about the spiritual reason for giving – that even if there wasn’t a deficit, it is just good to give, because money and greed are dangerous and generosity is the one sure antidote to their poison. Today I was going to tell you about what comes of giving: how the church – how our church – can be a place that bears much fruit: how it can grow in numbers and not only in numbers, but in all the things Paul calls the fruits of the Spirit: love, joy, peace, patience and the rest of them. It was going to be a lovely, visionary sermon – celebrating your generosity in helping make that kind of church happen.

And then a man strapped a bomb to himself, and went into the Manchester Arena, and murdered 22 people and injured many more. And we learned, soon, that it wasn’t just one deranged, pathetic individual, but a group – who carefully planned exactly how to kill as many young girls out for a night’s fun as they could. And suddenly a sermon about stewardship, or about the church, seems to just miss the point. The question for us now is: what does our faith have to say about such evil?

Well, the Feast of the Ascension is one very important part of the answer. When we think about the Ascension, we tend to get rather fixated on what one might call the special effects: Luke’s picture of Jesus actually going up into heaven, disciples staring open mouthed up into the sky as his feet disappear into the clouds. It’s worth noting that it’s only Luke who paints that picture. The other New Testament writers are more reserved, but they all share the same fundamental conviction as to what Ascension is actually *about*. It’s not really *about* the special effects. It is about the idea that God has appointed Jesus of Nazareth Judge of all things. God has appointed Jesus of Nazareth Judge of all things. He is the one who holds all our destinies in his hands: who fills them with joy, or dooms them to death.

And in relation to Manchester, that means two things. Those who were killed, those whose lives were irreparably damaged, they will find – along with all the victims of history, all those who have been scorned, beaten, despised and murdered – they will find that on the far side of death they are met by Jesus. And He will take them in his arms and he will love them. And although we cannot really imagine what that will mean, and although we still rage and weep at what happened to them here and now, we can trust that being met by Jesus means that for them, all will be well. All will be well. They will be full of life and love. They will rest in peace, and rise in glory.

It is not so for the wicked. The bomber and in due course those who sent him, will also be met by Jesus. He will meet them with perfect justice, and that will mean terrifying judgement, and burning fire. We know it is Jesus of Nazareth we are talking about. We know that if there is anything – anything – in these men which is capable of being healed, capable of repentance, that He will do his utmost to save them. God hates nothing that He has made; Jesus loves even the killer. If there is anything that can be done, He will do it. But.... quite possibly there is not. It is quite possible that that bomber, and his friends, sent themselves straight to Hell and that they will perish in Hell. There is indeed Justice in the universe. The Ascension means it is the justice of Jesus, a merciful justice, kind justice - but justice nonetheless. The men who bombed Manchester will meet their judgement, and it will be terrible.

That is the first thing our faith has to say about radical evil, and how God deals with it. It will be judged. It will die, and those who give themselves to it will die. One day, there will be a time for justice.

But also, says the Gospel, here and now there will also be healing. Here and now, part of what God does in response to evil is to breathe Himself into the world through human lives. The world has been deeply broken – even ruined – by evil: but God begins to heal and renew it by breathing into ordinary lives, lives like yours and mine. That’s the other part of what Ascension means: as St. John puts it really simply, Jesus goes away in order to come again: at the end of time to judge the living and the dead, but also and before that *now*, breathing himself into millions and millions of different human lives. Or John’s other favourite analogy: Jesus makes Himself the Vine, and we are his branches. His life will flow into us, flow up through us, into the world. It will bear much fruit. While others spread hatred and fear and violence and poison, our lives, rooted in His Life, will bring love, and joy, and peace – all the things Paul spoke of. God’s answer to Manchester – and to all the evil that disfigures his world, to all the greed, to all the abuse, to all the violence – is you and me and millions like us: millions of lives slowly being made new in His life, millions of lives slowly becoming more like Him.

That’s what being part of the church is. That’s why – incidentally – it is worth supporting, financially, so it can flourish here and in every place. It is not just a lovely building. It is not just the heart of a community, or the carrier of a tradition. It’s not just a worthy organisation. For all its failings – and my word, they are many – it is the way in which God is beginning to turn the world around. It is the first-fruits, the start of the renewal of humanity. That’s what you are part of. That’s what we need to be thinking in terms of as we think about the Mission Action Plan; that’s what you need to remember you’re really giving for. The renewal of the world. The healing of the world. And it is beginning with us. Amen.