

Easter VI, May 21st 2017

Psalm 19; 2 Cor 8.1-11; Matt.16:19-24

One of the frustrating things in my old job as a university chaplain was meeting bright young students, who were seriously interested in God and faith and how to live well in every way – but who had decided that Christianity was not the place to look for answers to their questions. These weren't people who had been born Muslims or Sikhs, indeed quite a few of them had been baptised as babies – indeed they were Christians, in the sense that lots and lots of people who don't read their bible, go to church, or think about God much say they're Christians. But when it came to the question of where to look for wisdom, Christianity didn't make the grade. They preferred to look at Islam, or in particular Judaism.

And when you asked them why, they would say something like this: well, Judaism – say – is not really a religion, is it? It's more a way of life. *Not really a religion, more a way of life.* I think what they meant was that Christianity seemed very interested in what people *believed*: did they have the correct view about Jesus? Did they know about God, and the Bible? Judaism, by contrast, is often rather relaxed about what people believe and keener on what they do: do they keep the sabbath? Do they honour father and mother? Do they observe the food laws? Are they generous? Think of the number of sermons I imagine you've heard about how Jews think they find salvation by keeping the Law, whilst Christians know that we can only be saved through faith. As it happens, I think that particular contrast is dubious to say the least – but it is one that preachers make a lot, and it explains why someone might think that Judaism is more about doing than believing. Why it's not so much a religion as a way of life.

What I think is really tragic about all this though is the rather poor picture of Christianity it suggests. If Christianity *isn't* a way of life, what is it? Are we suggesting that the Christian has no distinctive lifestyle – that in all other respects they might just be an absolutely typical member of, say, British society? That we'll do the same things as most people, spend our time the same way, desire the same things, praise the same virtues, share the same outlook? That the distinctively Christian bit is just an odd set of private opinions on a narrow range of issues we call religious, and perhaps the odd habit of coming to church on a Sunday morning? That's what it would be for Christianity to be a religion, and not a way of life: a curious kind of hobby, alongside the really central business of life which is just the same as everyone else's.

At which point it is worth remembering that Christianity and Judaism are deeply related, and that Jesus was a Jew. The odds are that Christianity is *meant to be* just as much a way of life as Judaism. That it is meant to reach into every corner of your life, and to reshape the whole thing. People should be able to look at your life and see that the whole thing fits, is coherent, makes sense – that your faith in Jesus is much more than just having an opinion about him, but is the rationale for everything about you. It is indeed a way of life.

The heart of the Jewish way of life is the Law. That is the great gift of God, which you spend a lifetime poring over, studying, absorbing, *loving* – letting it reshape everything about you. That's the beauty of Psalm 19: 'the law of the Lord is perfect, reviving the soul; the decrees of the Lord are sure, making wise the simple More to be desired are they than gold, even much fine gold, sweeter also than honey, dripping from the honeycomb.'

Christianity is marked by the same love, with a critical difference. We believe that in some sense Jesus of Nazareth is the fulfilment of the Law: that everything the Psalmist longed for somehow became true, and became flesh, in Jesus of Nazareth. We place him – the stories about Him in the Gospel, his presence now in the Eucharist, our relationship to him in prayer – at the centre of our lives. We spend a lifetime poring over, studying, absorbing, *loving* him – letting him reshape everything about us.

Practically, what does that mean? In his letter to the Philippians, Paul puts it very simply. Letting Jesus fill your hearts and minds, he says, means this: 'Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others.' (2:3-4). That is a *way of life agenda* – there is nothing in our lives: how we vote, how we shop, we relate to others, that is not covered by that. Jesus is to reshape the whole of life, not just part.

And to take just one of the most important particular manifestations of all this, take money. It's what our reading from 2 Corinthians was about, and our reading from the Gospel. Paul says to the Corinthian Christians – and to us – look at Jesus Christ. He was rich; and yet for your sake he became poor. He poured himself out so that you could benefit. Well then, it is simple: be like Jesus. If you have money, pour it out so that others can benefit. It is as clear as day for Paul: Christians are generous people. More generous than the world around them; generous to the point of sacrifice.

It's true of course that money is not the only thing God is interested in. We need to serve others with prayer, with time, with energy, with love. Absolutely. Nevertheless, Jesus did actually talk quite a bit about money. He seemed to suggest that it was *this* issue which revealed how far God had got in someone's life. 'Where your treasure is,' he said, 'there is your heart.' Is your treasure stored up in your bank account, held there for you? Or is it poured out for God and for others? And he also predicted that we would find this issue difficult, that we would find *actually* that it was money which we tended to pore over, studying, absorbing, *loving*. Money, not God. It has its own way of life agenda, and in the end you cannot go its way and God's way. 'You cannot serve God and money'.

So the message this morning is a simple one. If your faith is a way of life, and not just a religion. If you are remotely serious about being a follower of Jesus Christ, then you need to become more and more generous. Generous in all sorts of ways, but generous especially with money. I of course have no way of knowing what you give, and maybe you are already very generous indeed. Some of you I am quite sure are. But nationally, we are certainly not. Less than half of British people, apparently, give anything to charity each month. Far fewer than that do it in a regular, planned, really generous kind of way. As Christians we are to be different. We shouldn't go out of our way to advertise what we're doing, of course – but we should give in such a way that if the world did know, the world would be stunned.

So my challenge to you this stewardship month – in fact I'm bold enough to say, God's challenge to you, Jesus' challenge to you – is *look again*. Look again at your giving, to the church and to other organisations doing God's work, working for peace and justice. Does your giving say that Jesus Christ is at the centre of your life? Does your giving say that He is reshaping everything about you, and making you a person who puts others first? Does your giving say that your faith is not just a religion, but a way of life? Only you can answer those questions. But if you are remotely serious about being a disciple, please take what is left of May to think about them, and act on them.