

Sermon for Holy Trinity Church Geneva on Sunday 15 September 2024 – the 16th Sunday after Trinity

Texts: Isaiah 50.4-9a (at 10h30); James 3.1-12; Mark 8.27-end

Speak out for justice

In C.S.Lewis' series for children '*The Chronicles of Narnia*', in the kingdom of Narnia, ruled over by the great lion Aslan, many of the animals receive the gift of human speech. It is recognised as a great gift and one of the most terrible things which can befall an animal in that land is to lose it.

It is a gift that we too often take for granted. St James in that portion of his letter we've heard today shows us what an amazing thing the human tongue is. For with it, we can communicate in so many ways uttering words of praise, love, encouragement and truth.

Yet sadly we often squander this great gift of speech, using it for malicious gossip and vicious attack which can diminish and hurt others, sometimes with lethal effects. The recent race riots in the UK, when hatred was stirred up against migrants based on false information relayed on social media flowing the tragic death of three young girls at a dance class, shows us just how our gossip and willingness to accept 'fake news' can have terrible consequences.

Although we alone, as human beings, have the gift of speech, we know that all species of animals can communicate from simple to highly complex forms. We also are increasingly learning about types of communication existing between trees and other forms of plant life. What is clear is that creation is communicating to us, the terrible suffering which it is enduring through the damage for which largely we, as a species, are responsible. From global warming, loss of precious biodiversity, oceans and rivers choked with plastics destruction of rainforests, and highly damaging intensive farming methods, we see creation itself crying out in pain and in warning.

And despite the fact that we have caused such intense damage to satisfy our needs and wishes, so many of our fellow human beings throughout the world are also suffering. The Director of Franciscans International, Blair Matheson, who led the first of our sessions on advocacy this week, reminded us that every human being is unique, precious and has dignity. However, currently only one person in ten enjoys each of the basic human rights which we take for granted – the rights to food, clothing, shelter, medical care and clean water.

Today we are being asked in our Bible readings two fundamental questions. What sort of God do we believe in? And depending on our answer to the first question, 'So what am I going to do about it in terms of how I live my life?'

Jesus asks his disciples to tell him who the crowds think that he is and they give him the variety of answers they've picked up – 'John the Baptist, Elijah; 'One of the prophets'. But then he turns the question directly on them. 'But who do you say that I am?' Peter responds 'The Messiah'. But it is clear from Jesus' subsequent words

and above all, in his sharp rebuke of Peter, that the disciples have no grasp yet of what this really means. We suspect that for Peter and probably the rest of the disciples, their hope for the Messiah, in line with Jewish expectation would be someone who would triumphantly establish God's rule, take power and they would share in the fruits of that power which would taste sweet indeed after the bitterness of Roman occupation.

Yet Jesus paints a very different picture. The Messiah will suffer greatly, will be rejected, will be killed and rise again. And anyone who hopes to follow him must be prepared to live sacrificially, for God and for others, and that this is the only thing, at the end of the day which will have meaning and value. We have a choice whether to follow him in this path but if we do not, we cannot bear his name for we will not be with him.

Today, we are challenged to think whether we too, really accept this. 'What sort of God do I believe in?' Is it God as Jesus has revealed to Peter or have we created some image in our minds of a God who is somehow less demanding.

And the next question we face today is, 'If I believe in God who offers himself for us in sacrificial love as revealed in Jesus and calls us to do the same, what am I prepared to do about it?' Do I think my faith is just about me and my salvation? Or if I look at Christ and really think about what I am hearing from Jesus in the gospel today, am I prepared to go out and act?

Today, we're looking at this specifically in the context of the pain and cry of creation which we are facing now. For the environment is the number one issue we face today. We know that we are about hit the level for global warning after which we may be propelled to a stage in which we no longer have control on what happens next. Many of our brothers and sisters around the world are already living with the consequences of this as sea levels rise and flood their lands and habitats are destroyed. For their sake and for the sake of those who will follow us, we have to act now.

So what can we do?

First of look at our own life styles and see what changes we can make. These may include adopting a greater vegetarian diet as meat production has a huge environmental impact. In Europe we eat on average, 1.5 kilos of meat a week which is twice the global average. Moving to a vegetarian diet cuts our carbon footprint from diet by 50% - that's the equivalent of driving 1,300 miles a year!). We can make a big effort to cut down our use of cars and use of public transport or walk instead where possible. We can also cut down the number of clothes we buy and upcycle those we have as we know that the production of many clothes uses a huge amount of water and many of our discarded clothes with end up in landfill or flooding and damaging textile markets in Africa and elsewhere.

Then, thinking of that message of St James this morning, we can use our tongues and our others gifts of communication to acts as advocates for others and to campaigning for change. For each of us, the path we feel called to take will be different. For some, we may be concerned at the excess of packaging including

plastics used by many of our major food and drink producers and we may want to try to challenge them to use more environmentally friendly methods.

Our intrepid team from Holy Trinity who took part in the clean-up of Lake Lemman yesterday will be able to tell you of the sheer amount of packaging and other rubbish which has accumulated in and around the lake – something we need to change.

Others may be shocked at the effects of mining companies throughout the world, including much deep sea mining and its impact on the natural environment as well as the livelihoods of those who are displaced from their lands or are living and working in dangerous conditions in the mines. We may feel called to look more deeply into what lies behind the production of metals and products we use including the lithium in our electric car batteries and challenge the companies concerned to adopt better working practices.

Or we may be uncomfortable as we find out the implications of the low prices of some of the foods and clothes we enjoy today – and draw to look more closely into the chain of production. How is this being supplied at this low price? Have those who have produced it received a fair wage? Are they working in safe conditions? Is the company helping to benefit the lives of their families in those countries, for example by ensuring they have access to health and education through providing health and education?

It is important that we equip ourselves to do this and do it well and that is why I would encourage you to attend the next two sessions of our Advocacy course. These will be run by the Revd Mike French of the Lutheran World Federation on 25 September and 2 October at 19h here. Mike will help show us all the practical tools for effective communication we have at our disposal and how to put these together to make a really effective campaign,

A final reflection. This week, I have been moved, as a number of you I know have, by the sudden death, at a very young age of David Knowles, a former member of our choir who was a successful journalist with the Telegraph. We have also seen this week, the tragic sudden death of Azania Lupai, wife of one of our congregation James Alemi.

It is a sharp reminder of our mortality and a call to use our lives wisely and generously. David Knowles did just that, using his gifts and skills as a journalist to help the people, particularly through his innovative podcasts in Ukraine. Azania through her work with UNHCR in Khartoum and here in Geneva did just this as well.

Let's pray today that we will have the courage to stand up for those who are suffering, to campaign for real and lasting change for good for the environment and to be willing to start with ourselves – to put our own lives in order.

Amen

The Revd Canon Dr Daphne Green