

Tidenham, Tutshill, Chase 17/3/24

Jeremiah 31: 31-34, John 12: 20-33 – Troubles and the Answer

Prayer

If we ever go on a course about how we can help with pastoral work, one thing we all learn is never to say to people – *I know how you feel*. We don't know; we can't know. Sometimes we find it hard enough to know how **we** feel, let alone how another person feels. But having said that we live in a world that lays great store, it seems on feelings. *How does that make you feel?* Can be helpful... how does the news about David moving on make you feel? Hold that one for the moment.

The Bible rarely talks about feelings and how people feel. Lots about what people say and do, but not so much about what people feel. So when we find a verse in John 12 where Jesus says *Now my soul is troubled...* we should take notice. Jesus found himself troubled because he knew what he was facing. He had entered Jerusalem on a donkey a day or two before, and he knew he was facing the final betrayal and crucifixion. If anything, *troubled* was an understatement. In the garden of Gethsemane he would be sweating blood.

Troubled – it's a word broad and general enough to cover the range of feelings we may have when we hear that David our much loved parish priest is going to a new post. Congratulations – a terrific vote of confidence; David will be working with a great team in Gloucester. They will be a blessing to him and he will be a blessing to them. It's a wonderful opportunity to help shape ministers across the diocese, the county, in their early years. Within *troubled* there's probably sadness too – we'll miss David, Kathy and Roseanne, even Leo, I suppose. And maybe there's some uncertainty too – about the future – a vacancy, appointment process and what will the new vicar be like? Never as good as the old one, we can be sure, because there's a general rule that the further back you go the more wonderful the vicars were...

If we are troubled the first thing is that Jesus understands, because he knows what it is like to be troubled. In our morning prayers we have been reading Hebrews, not a light read, but we find there talking about Jesus, *we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathise with our weaknesses, but we have one who in every respect has been tested as we are, yet without sin.*

Jesus was troubled, but he went on anyway. He could have run away, hidden maybe, but he knew that it was God's will for him to go to the cross. It's there in John 12, verse 32 – *And I when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself*. In our Lent group on Tuesday we will be looking at Jesus' sacrifice and what it means for us. But Jesus went knowingly towards the cross because he knew that was right for him. He went towards what was troubling him; he didn't try and avoid it, or deny it, or belittle it or pretend that he was the great hero – troubled and obedient to God's call.

Now we might be wanting to cheer him on, applaud him, praise him... yesterday I was in Cardiff at the Principality stadium...

But Jesus does not call us simply to cheer him on. John 12 verse 26 – *Whoever serves me must follow me, and where I am there will be my servant be also...* That might remind us of what Jesus said earlier to the disciples – *If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me*. Today is what we call Passion Sunday and we are getting close to the heart of Jesus' story, the path of Holy Week to the cross and Easter. Crunch time for Jesus – facing the weight of Jewish religious tradition, the power of Roman military and political power, would he waver,

compromise, tone down the message to make it more palatable? No, Jesus would walk towards what troubled him.

And what troubles us is not on the same scale, is it? But the challenge is not entirely different. Whatever the trouble might be, we can walk towards it, knowing that we are not alone in that. If we are sad at David's going, we are not alone in that. If we are uncertain about what will happen, we are not alone in that. We have each other, but more than that, we have Jesus' promise of the Holy Spirit. A couple of chapters further on in John 14 we read Jesus telling the disciples – *the Advocate, the Holy Spirit will teach you everything and remind you of all that I have said to you. Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid...*

All the external stuff is just that – external. Did you hear that wonderful first reading from Jeremiah and the promise there of the new covenant, the new promise, the new relationship with the Lord? It was the promise that the Lord would write on our hearts; it would be the promise of forgiveness and relationship not only restored but direct – *they shall all know me from the least of them to the greatest, says the Lord*. We have a great parish priest, David, and in due time God willing we'll have another great parish priest, but – I say this with the deepest respect - we don't need him to have our relationship with the Lord. We don't need him to be our mediator. We don't need the institution or anything external between us and the Lord. We can all know Jesus for ourselves – from the least to the greatest. And he will hold us whatever we face, whatever trouble there may be, whatever joys there may be.

And knowing Jesus we can walk with him and follow him. Jesus knew his path to the cross was the path of obedience to his Father. He knew that this death would also be his victory over the forces of evil and death. In dying Jesus defeated death because his death was not the end. A couple of weeks and we will be at Easter. *And I when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself*. The Jesus who attracts is the Jesus who dies for us.

Follow me, he says. It sounds hard; it's meant to. It is challenging to follow Jesus seriously, but I am sure that it is also the most joyful thing anyone can do. To know that Jesus is with me, wherever I may be, whatever I am facing, is worth the price of putting him first. And as for the promise that the Father will honour the one who serves Jesus, that is amazing. That God should notice and honour our puny efforts at service! Jesus is worth following, I don't think Jesus is worth following a bit. He is worth following wholeheartedly. We might try and fudge it, but it doesn't work. Better by far to go for it – follow Jesus with everything you are and everything you have. The follower of Jesus cannot lose. In giving all, she gains all. In losing life, he finds it. Jim Elliott who was martyred as a missionary in South America said, *He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep to gain what he cannot lose*.

We can go forward in obedience and in peace whether to the excitement of something new or the apprehension of something unknown, because we can trust the one who is calling us forward and who walks with us and will never let us go. Into first gear, ease up the clutch and go...

Prayer