

The Seventeenth Sunday after Trinity (Proper 23)

St Briavels and Hewelsfield, 2022

2 Timothy 2:8-15

Luke 17:11-19

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.
Amen.

It's funny how when I sit down in the week before I will be preaching on the Sunday, and I spent some time with the Bible readings, sometimes patterns jump out really easily, and sometimes things are a bit more slow to turn up. It was a bit of the latter case this week, and in fact I was only looking at these readings the last time yesterday morning when I noticed something that I think is probably quite important.

As you know, through the long summer season, when we use the liturgical colour of green - as we will continue to do for just a few more weeks now before Advent once again comes around - when we use green we are spending our time thinking about how the birth, childhood, ministry, betrayal, death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus Christ applies to us. If you like, in the first half of the year from Advent to Pentecost we remind ourselves of the story, the truth about Christ. And then from early summer until these colder, shorter autumnal days we kind of say, okay then, if all of that is true, what differences does it make to me? Really in these last few weeks of an old Christian year with trying to get that nailed down, get straight in our heads what it might mean to be Christian here in St Briavels/Hewelsfield. How does any of this actually cash out? What is the difference between believing this, and not?

And I think the key to our two readings today is actually the first sentence in the first reading, and the last in the gospel reading. There is actually an important and rather neat symmetry in what we are given today.

The first sentence of our first reading read: 'be mindful that the Lord Jesus Christ is risen again from the dead.' Or the equivalent in the translation that we heard just now. Be mindful, or remember, that the Lord Jesus Christ is risen again from the dead. In other words, remember Easter. That is the lens through which all of our Christian living happens.

And then the last sentence of the gospel reading read: 'arise, go thy way; for thy faith hath made thee whole. Or the equivalent. Get up and be on your way, your faith has made you whole.

One really important truth about God, at the beginning of the first reading. And then a really important truth about us at the end of the gospel. Something about God. Something about us.

One of the great traps that people fall into with Christianity is thinking that somehow we have to *do* stuff in order to make God do other things. If I don't pray hard enough, God won't stop the war in Ukraine. If I don't pray hard enough, God won't let my relative recover from this horrible illness. If I don't pray hard enough, if I don't live a good enough Christian life, God might not notice me at all.

So we load ourselves up with guilt, we get is a really weird idea of how prayer might work stuck in our head.

That section of the second letter to Timothy that we heard read just now - which is ascribed to St Paul, and could well have been written by him, or if not by him then one of his close

disciples not long after his death - that section is a big wodge of teaching about how it is that God relates to us. And it all depends on Easter. And it all depends on the fact that the tomb was empty.

Let me just remind you of the words we heard: 'if we are dead with Christ we shall live also with him. If we suffer, we shall also reign with him. If we deny him he will also deny us. If we are faithless, he continues *faithful*.'

Easter fundamentally changes our relationship with Christ. Because what happens at Easter is that, to use the theological language, we get incorporated into Christ. What that means is that where Christ is becomes where we are as well. And that's not just about Easter of course, but it's about Christmas as well. Think about the manger: in the dark, in the confusion of an occupied land, amongst the poverty and the searching for hope, suddenly there is Christ. So Christ becomes where we are, and we become where Christ is.

There are some awfully cheesy American pictures and statues that you can buy. I don't recommend that you do! They are things like pictures of Jesus playing a game of kickabout football in the back garden with a young lad. Or two friends sitting chatting together, and Jesus has his arm round the shoulder one of them and is putting his thumb up with the other hand. As I say, not the sort of thing that would be my first choice for the mantelpiece, but actually they are making a fair point. God is not somewhere else. God is not up in heaven, so that you have to build a complicated contraption to hook him down. God is already with you. God is already with me. In the person of Jesus Christ. And we have the greatest possible reminder of that in a few moments time, when bread and wine

mysteriously become for us Christ's own body and Christ's own blood. God right here, on this table; in your hand; in your soul. And so because Christ is that close, we share in the truths of Christ. So, as the first reading reminded us, our suffering turns into victory. Our death turns into life. Because that's what happened to Jesus.

What is our part in that? The last line of the gospel reading gives us that bit. 'Your faith has made you whole.' This isn't forced upon us. I think I've preached before this summer about how Vladimir Putin gives us a really good example of what God is *not* like. Some rulers rule through fear and threat and force. If you don't tell the party line, you go to prison, you disappear in the night, you find yourself in a shallow grave somewhere. That is one way of ruling, but is not through love, it's through fear. God is utterly unlike that. So our faith still has a part in this. And you'll remember that in reading from Timothy there was that line: 'if we deny him, he will also deny us.' We still have a choice. This isn't force. We are not puppets on strings, a great army of Jesus's robots. We choose to respond, or not.

But that doesn't stop the grace flowing. Yes, if we deny him he will also deny us, because he doesn't want to force us. But when we are faithless he remains *faithful*. We don't have to get this right all of the time. Just every now and then when our faith is strong, we manage to be like that one leper who remembers to come back and give thanks. But even we don't, we are still healed. Notice that. All ten lepers still get healed. Even though only one properly recognises what's happening.

I guess coming to communion regularly is a way of us remembering to turn around, to come back to Jesus, to give thanks, and then go off into the world to try to remember to keep being people of Easter. People of thanksgiving. Amen.