

Sermon: 2021/02/09 (5th Sunday after Epiphany) - *Isaiah 58:1-12; Psalm 112:1-10; 1 Corinthians 2:1-16; & Matthew 5:13-20*_BTR

[Invite children to the front. Pot of pudding and a spoon.]

[Open pudding.]

Have you ever heard the expression, "the proof is in the pudding"?
What does it mean?

[Wait for response.]

It means that, yes, somebody can *tell* you how *truly* delicious and sweet pudding is, but it is much, *much* more powerful and persuasive to actually *try* some!

[Take a big bite of pudding.]

Yum! ...

When Saint Paul - the Apostle - went to the Greek city of "Corinth" to carry out the "Great Commission" of 'proclaiming the mystery of ...Jesus Christ, and [H]im crucified', he knew that it was going to be difficult.

So, how to do it?

I mean, finding out that God offers you and me a *free* gift of *eternal* life *sounds* great - *because it is(!)*, but a life of grateful faithfulness *in response* means making some *big* changes, and *those* aren't easy.

So, how to convince others?

Well, as we hear Paul remind the Corinthians (in his letter), what he decided to do was not using 'plausible words of wisdom' - *not at first*, but to *show* them just how good it is to be a Christian, when you *really* give it a go.

The proof is in the pudding.

Let's pray:

Lord God, ..., in Jesus' name we pray, amen.

[Dismiss children.]

One of the biggest temptations facing the American Church, today, is, let's be honest, to *disown* the Old Testament;

that is, to put some "distance" between who we are as a people, and what it has to say about everyday matters.

The same is true back home:

Perhaps you heard last week, of the controversy that erupted in England about a report produced by the "House of Bishops."

A public statement released on Social Media, it stated, essentially, only that they had *not* changed their position on questions of sexuality and marriage.

The *official* "line," in other words, is remaining the same - for the time being.

That is to say, the bishops of the "C. of E." came out declaring *merely* that they were going to continue to *cleave*, in principle, to the *ancient* teaching of the Church,

which is that sex is a *sacred* thing - a sacred thing" intended by God for expression *solely* between *married* men and women.

Well, as you can imagine, this *immediately* caused a terrible uproar.

Outrageous!

Hurtful!

Insensitive.

And, predictably, some of the very same (episcopal) signatories to the statement then began to "backtrack," apologising for doing no more than announcing what was true;

apologising for just upholding what the Church, *overwhelmingly, always* taught to be true until, well... pretty much yesterday.

(Or certainly, at least, until the "Sixties.")

And, to be clear, outside of the West, most Christians everywhere else are *still* convinced that no new "evidence" has come to light to upset the *unambiguous* testimony about such a matter.

There isn't.

It doesn't exist.

(Some "new evidence" that justifies radical revisionism on the topic.)

What *has* changed are our *attitudes* to the evidence.

Now, more and more, we simply... discount it.

In the mouths or attitudes of many these days, the Old Testament is no longer treated as "inspired" revelation, providing *unique* insight to the mind of God, but, rather, regarded as a historical document peculiar to a particular place and era now extinct; a "snapshot" of primitive, unenlightened thinking; an antique.

But *why* do we find ourselves inclined, more and more, to "discount" the Bible like this - those uncomfortable parts, that is, especially as they relate to "bedroom issues" - like in *Leviticus* or *Deuteronomy*, when Jesus Himself says, *explicitly*, that we should (continue to) 'teach' 'them'?

And, furthermore, if we do continue to teach them, He says, we will be 'called *great* in the Kingdom of Heaven.'

Why, then, do we find ourselves inclined to "discount" the Bible?

Because, perversely, I guess, we would rather be called 'great' in the "Kingdom of the *Earth*."

More particularly, because we would rather be called "great" by the "chattering classes" - the culture-shapers; on Twitter and TV.

Because we want - most of us, it seems, particularly if you are young (or wish to be seen as young) - to be *famous* - "famous" in the here-and-now:

To be *popular*.

You know, a recent study found that 75% of children aged six to 17 aspire to be - not a mum, or a soldier, or a vicar, or even an astronaut - but *YouTube personalities*; ^[n.1] a celebrity.

Accordingly, on Wednesdays where Rebekah and I run the youth group, many of the teenagers we serve there are currently trying to "make it big" on an app called, "Tik-Tok."

What is it?

"Tik-Tok" is a video-sharing service based out of Beijing, to which you post a short-clip of yourself singing a song or doing something silly or comedic; and the idea - *the dream* - is for complete strangers to love your video and to circulate it. To attract attention, of course, among the *millions* of your peers competing to do the same, you need to make your footage grotesque or crazy; *extreme*:

Thus, through the window the other day, in fact, I watched my young neighbour - he's about sixteen - rapidly punching and being punched - in the face and elsewhere - by three other boys, friends of his, whilst a fifth companion filmed it. They weren't angry with one either; they hadn't had some violent disagreement. The goal was to garner "clicks"; "likes;" *views* on Tik-Tok.

Jesus, however, casts a different vision for His people; His *disciples*.

He calls us to be 'salt of the earth'.

And that means, essentially, that we should care less about being a "somebody" and to focus instead on being those quiet, dependable "pillars" upon whom civilization always has rested.

Yes, nations need *some* leadership.

The Church needs them too.

And a prophet or two, now and then;
who seek to give direction; to *steer* the "ship."

But, much, *much* more important are those who take seriously the everyday, *mundane* tasks of producing food, raising children, building bridges and doing *all* those things that Hollywood would never make movies about.

These people are, in fact, those who really bring about flourishing human society. Just consider how Christianity "conquered" the Roman Empire, for example.

How?

"From below."

The first believers didn't shout and clamour and cancel. [n.2]

Rather, privately, they adopted the simple, wholesome mores and ethics of the Scriptures in their own homes - simple, wholesome mores and ethics that felt and seemed very *alien*, by the way - implausible;

and found that, by doing so, life became more...humane; pleasant; *liveable*.

Less harsh and angular and unpredictable.

"Salty" people, in other words, aren't exotic and flashy.

You won't see them on the cover of *Vogue* or *Rolling Stone*.

Nor in Washington.

So, let me bring this sermon "full circle" to where I began:

Jesus, by and large, leaves the teaching of the Old Testament - "the Law," He calls it, unchanged.

He didn't 'abolish' it because it remained - *and remains* - the guide-book for the best kind of *genuinely human* existence.

And this is true even about what it has to say about love and relationships, though it *seems* so out-of-date; so...*unpalatable* in this current "climate."

('[N]ot a wisdom of this age', as Paul puts it to the *Corinthians*.)

But actually, *if* we scrutinise its standard more closely, and, better, put it into *practice*, what we find is marvellous and unexpected:

what the Bible calls us to, if we dare be "salty," is *romance*.

An almost utopic, Disney model of love where we invest it all in *one* partner, with whom we *choose* to "live happily ever after."

By an unshakeable commitment to them by everything that we have.

"'Til death us do part."

"In sickness and in health."

"For better or for worse."

Just imagine, for a moment, what the world would look like if more of us more thoroughly abided to such a calling.

Imagine how much less heartache there would be;

imagine how much less (emotional) "baggage" men and women would carry.

Imagine how much more we would trust each other;

Imagine how different so many things would be...

Now, many of us, of course, have 'fallen short' - I, myself - of this lofty ambition.

But that's okay.

Because, and this is the Gospel, *if* you confess your failure to God, it's never too late to start aspiring again.

(That's "aspiring" not to greatness here, mind, but "up there.")

Footnotes:

1. See: <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-4532266/75-cent-children-want-YouTubers-vloggers.html>
2. See, for example: <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/06/28/style/is-it-canceled.html>