

## **Trinity XII**

**30 August 2020**

**Readings: Jeremiah 15: 15-21, Psalm 26: 1-8, Romans 12: 9-end,  
Matthew 16: 21-end**

The image of Jesus as the Good Shepherd is perhaps the most popular of the many ways in which we envisage him. This is because it is a comforting image, that of a good and gentle shepherd who cares very much about each and every one of his sheep, a shepherd who cares so much that he does not want to leave even one sheep lost in the wilderness, and a shepherd who invites each of his sheep to eternal life with him. We need to be comforted and strengthened. That is one of the reasons we are here this morning.

But we also need to be challenged. And that is what Jesus does in our gospel for today when he says, 'If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.' Jesus was not someone who shunned all the pleasures of this life. Remember how his first miracle was turning water into wine at a wedding feast. Or how he attended dinner parties. He did not look forward to hardship. This is why he rounds on Peter so harshly in today's lesson, calling him Satan and a stumbling block, for Peter was putting temptation in his way: the temptation to avoid the way of the cross. Jesus' humanity recoiled at this grisly prospect, just as we would. He was recoiling from it on the night before his execution when he prayed in Gethsemane, 'My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me' (Matthew 26: 39). In the end, however, Jesus, as we know, was obedient to God.

Jesus' way, the way of the cross, is often difficult because the world is so often opposed to Jesus' way of living. We live in a world that is basically opposed to sharing and being content with what you need rather than what you can get. Our society honours those who make the most money and accumulate the most toys. Our society is very suspicious of strangers, of anyone different from us. Jesus advocates hospitality and openness to strangers, especially strangers in need. Our society urges us to sue people whenever we can in order to get a big settlement. Jesus calls us both to forgive and to strive to see that the justice we seek is leavened with mercy. The way of the cross is hard because it urges us to stand up and protest against injustice or oppression, all the more so if such standing up and being counted will make us unpopular. The prophets such as Jeremiah certainly experienced the cost of being unpopular, for they became persecuted outcasts. This is why Jeremiah is complaining to God in our Old Testament lesson today. We recently read of the prophet Elijah's sulking in a cave because he was fed up with being an outcast whose words went unheeded.

We would not be human if we did not from time to time become beset by doubts or even lose hope. In other words, we all can begin to moan along with

Jeremiah and Elijah. When this happens we need to take our eyes off ourselves and look to God. God is always calling us to take heart and persevere, since God in Jesus has assured us that in the end victory and new life are ours, because they are God's. God knows us and understands us. God's Son Jesus complained at Gethsemane, just as we complain. But then at Easter came that great inbreaking of new life, that assurance that we do not have to worry about failure and death in this life because these things do not have the final say. Life and the triumph of God's kingdom of justice and love have the final say. For this reason our primary task in this life is to orientate ourselves on Jesus and strive as best we can to live his gospel of love. This is what coming out of the cave with Elijah or jumping out of the boat with Peter, images I used in a recent sermon, are all about. If we act as we sincerely believe the Spirit is commanding us to act, we will be ok, even if our actions fail. The important thing is simply to follow where we believe Jesus is leading us. When we stumble and fall, Jesus will catch us, just as he caught Peter and saved him from drowning in the stormy waters of the lake.

'The Lord's My Shepherd' is a well-loved hymn. But I think we need to set beside it that wonderful hymn by Maria Willis, 'Father, Hear the Prayer We Offer.' Set side by side these two hymns say a great deal about our faith. I'd like to leave you with the words of the latter hymn, which is not as well known as Psalm 23.

Father, hear the prayer we offer:  
not for ease that prayer shall be,  
but for strength that we may ever  
live our lives courageously.

Not for ever in green pastures  
do we ask our way to be;  
but the steep and rugged pathway  
may we tread rejoicingly.

Not for ever by still waters  
would we idly rest and stay;  
but would smite the living fountains  
from the rocks along our way.

Be our strength in hours of weakness,  
in our wanderings be our guide;  
through endeavour, failure, danger,  
Father, be thou at our side.

Charles Brown