

Sermon given by The Revd Andrew Bain on 14th October

“Remember who you are”

Readings: Amos 5: 6-7, 10-15; Hebrews 4: 12-16; Mark 10: 17-31

Peter: Look we have left everything to follow you.

I love Peter, big-hearted, brave, scared, “speak first engage brain later” Peter. Peter who offers to build tents on the Mount of the Transfiguration, Peter who says: No, Lord this shall never happen to you; Peter who has faith to walk on water - but not quite enough; Peter who professes: “Lord to whom shall we go, you have the words of eternal life?” and “Lord, you are the Christ”; Peter who says: “I do not know the man”; Peter who weeps; Peter who is forgiven and told to tend the sheep, feed the lambs.

Peter gives me hope in the living out of my own on/off, good days/bad days, ever hopeful, but often inconsistent living out of my faith. So often he speaks for us, both on days when he gets it right and on days when he gets it wrong.

And he speaks for us today: “Look we have left everything and followed you.” He’s almost acting as shop steward for the disciples. In another Gospel he goes even further, he says: “What are we to have then?” With all this talk of giving up everything, and camels and eyes of needles, the disciples are beginning to wonder if Jesus is setting the bar so high no-one’s got a chance. Moreover, they think they’ve already given pretty much everything they have to give, so what are we to have then?

Well, by the looks of our readings this morning, not much. When I sat down to write this sermon I was kind of saying mentally: “Gee thanks, Nicki. I get the Sunday with readings like these, readings which don’t offer much for anyone’s comfort.” Amos, never a cheery sort, gives us “Seek the Lord and live or he will break out against the House of Jacob like fire.” The writer to the Hebrews gives us the Word of God sharper than any two-edged sword, separating soul from spirit, joint from marrow (a bit gruesome) searching the intentions of my heart and yours until there’s nowhere to hide, we’re all naked and laid bare.

And Jesus’s promise of making up all that we’ve lost or given for the kingdom, is salted with a prophecy of persecutions and the uncompromising assurance that all our ways of thinking are going to be turned upside down. The first last, the last first, and we’re left uncertain where we might come in that new re-ordering of absolutely everything. Where will I be in Jesus’s vision of the kingdom? Where am I now? Maybe even who am I before God?

Last weekend saw an event which for many was massively more important than Brexit, or party conferences or the latest faux pas by Donald Trump. We got a new Dr Who. And a female Dr Who at that. Someone we know, right from days when some of us who are old enough really do remember hiding behind the sofa when the Daleks appeared, someone we know to be extraordinarily special, someone with a gift and a destiny. Only in this first episode a first tension for her was trying to recall who she was. Traumatized by her latest transformation she struggled to remember her name.

Maybe less dramatically, but just as vitally - because our scriptural writers see our individual lives as lives played out in a cosmic drama that’s much bigger than ourselves - I think these readings, these difficult readings, are about us beginning to remember who we are, and what is our gift and our destiny? Abraham Lincoln had that wonderful

phrase where he challenged the American people to rediscover what he called “the better angels of our nature.” And I think what’s going on here is something like that.

Amos pins the people of Israel against the wall with charges about their lack of urgent concern for the poor, their slide into easy corruptions they now barely even notice, pushing aside the needy in the gate. And yet this is not a fatal diagnosis. He’s not saying this is without hope or that people are irredeemable. No, he says, lean into what you know God wants for you; lean into the Covenant you’ve known about all your lives – only you’ve got to live it, not just know it. So “seek good and not evil, so the Lord, the God of hosts will be with you, just as you have said.” Know who you really are in God. Remember what you know.

And neither does the Writer to the Hebrews leave us hopeless either. Again, he makes the diagnosis of our naked sinfulness – the stuff he knows we really don’t want brought into the light. He knows we’re afraid. Like Adam and Eve in the garden we’re ashamed and we hide from God; but the remedy is a mercy to which Christians can cling with real hope: “For we do not have a high priest unable to sympathise with us in our weaknesses, but one who was tested as we are, yet without sin.”

Peter, the forgiven one, could testify to that. As can we all. Only the graciousness of that high priest who is also our brother, our brother in the flesh and our brother in suffering, only that graciousness and love allows any of us to be here. Grace, the most beautiful word in the Christian vocabulary, a love for which I don’t have to prove myself worthy, that’s what brings us here. It’s the first word uttered in our liturgy: “Grace, and peace to you...”

We can enter here because we’re loved and forgiven before we’ve even confessed.

And here lies the answer to the perplexed questioning of the disciples when it all looks just too hard, the bar set far too high. In our mortal state, as Amos and the Writer to the Hebrews depict us, almost expose us, yes, it is too hard. But when we recall, when we remember who we are under grace, then it looks different. All things are possible for God working in us when we stop flailing around like a drowning man who almost beats off his rescuer. When we remember who we are in God. The saints, and Peter especially, allow God to work in them and on them, if you like, by faithfully continuing to show up – yesterday’s failures and sins and shortcomings, all of that notwithstanding – and it’s almost like you say to God: Here I am again, Lord. It’s me again. Take my broken stuff and redeem it; take the wounds you know without my even telling you and heal them; take me, as I’m known to you alone. It’s grace like that that takes us through the eye of the needle, and makes what looks impossible for us possible for God.

So Amos says: Seek God and live. The Writer to the Hebrews tell us not to give up on ourselves because we have a brother who loves us. And Jesus tells us that God can do the impossible in any of us. We are never without hope.

So I’ve changed my mind. These are great readings. We just have to remember who we really are. Amen.