

Sermon preached by the Rev'd Canon Philip Banks
St Edmundsbury Cathedral
Sunday 29 July 2018: Ninth Sunday after Trinity
Texts: 2 Kings 4.42-end; Ephesians 3.14-end; John 6.1-21

You Inner Being

“I pray that you may be strengthened in your inner being, that Christ may dwell in your hearts as you are being rooted and grounded in love”. [Ephesians 3.14]

We live in a titanic kind of world, which can feel almost disdainful of the ordinary lives we try to live. It is so big and complicated – issues so easy to get lost in, so easy to feel overshadowed by economics, and protagonists in politics shouting at us rather than keeping quiet and trying to discern wisdom. The egos on display of the three most powerful nations of the world don't help matters.

In all that, what possible difference can one person make – you or me – to stand for the right things, not the easy wrong things. Mercy, love, compassion, gratitude, tenderness, warmth – words which large sections of the world and media seem to have almost forgotten.

Last week I was on Retreat, receiving the warm hospitality and prayerful space of the Anglican Centre in Rome. On St James's Day, last Wednesday, I joined the Dominicans for Vespers and the Eucharist in their church in the centre of Rome – Sta Maria del sopra Minerva. If you've been there

you'll know that it is the resting place of St Catherine of Siena, buried there: a beautiful effigy of her in a small shrine just in front of the main altar. Golly, if you feel overwhelmed or disheartened by living in complex times, imagine her – living in 14th-century Rome: war between Italian states and the great schism of western Christianity at full tilt: one Pope in Avignon, and another Pope in Rome. St Catherine as a Dominican was caught up in the politics of all that, and in fact was said to have been a significant player in mediation bringing the Papacy together. You thought Brexit was tricky to navigate!

Staying in the heart of Rome – yes, surrounded by such a wealth of art, archaeology and architecture – what really struck me was the resilience and suffering of the earliest Christians: despite the 'power statements' of those grand church buildings, wherever you walk, not far away is a reminder of those early Christians' faithfulness and courage, even in the face of death. You can begin to list them yourself... Hippolytus, Clement, Lawrence, Justin Martyr, Peter, Paul, just to name a few of the well-known names. The catacombs bear the bodies of countless others. And how could I go to Rome and not visit St Cecilia, patron saint of musicians, martyred for her faith: a beautiful, peaceful space in the church and convent in the Trastevere district, where she is buried.

Amongst the people I met at the Anglican Centre was a student from Pakistan – her father a Christian there. How hard it is to be a Christian in so many parts of Pakistan today.

So as I spent time in quiet reflecting and praying about these things, and on Bishop Tim's sermon last week, one of the books I took with me to read was 'The Book of Joy' published not long ago by Dali Lama and Desmond Tutu. It is a fantastic short book – really about resilience and the recognition that the more we give ourselves away, the stronger and more joyful we become – but – the 'giving away' first requires cultivating the right inner habits.

“Every human wants to discover happiness and avoid suffering. No differences in education, culture or religion affect this. From the core of our being we simply desire contentment. Yet so often these things are fleeting, like the butterfly that lands on us and then flutters away.

“The ultimate source of happiness is within us. And the problem is that our world and education remain focussed on external and materialistic values – we aged not taught or trained anywhere near enough to be concerned with our inner being”.¹

So speak Desmond Tutu and the Dali Lama.

Scripture says the same to us about our inner being. Into our fragile world with all it's complexities, suffering and injustice, speaks today's scripture readings: “I pray that you may be strengthened in your inner being, that Christ may dwell in your hearts as you are being rooted and grounded in love”, says St Paul.

And into our fragile world speaks too the gospel reading with that amazing miracle story – two miracles in fact, if you include the tailpiece on the lake. Bear with me if I'm about

to tell you stuff that you think you already know: miracle stories always need to be read on many different levels of meaning.

First... Jesus reveals his abundant generosity and love, graciously and very practically feeding hungry mouths – 500 in this telling of the story. (If Christ dwells in me, in you, how am I 'feeding the hungry' by making the world a more just and fairer place?).

And this miracle is a metaphor for Chris feeding our hungry souls if we but open our hearts to his love and his voice in our lives. (If Christ dwells in you and me – how are you feeding hungry souls with your life?).

Second... the writers are trying to help those listeners who would have been deeply immersed in their knowledge of the Hebrew Scriptures, the Old Testament, recognising in this miracle Jesus as the promised Messiah. That's why we have Elisha (a prophet) in today's first reading miraculously feeding a whole army of men. Listeners would also have in their bloodstream the story of Moses (representing 'the Law') – also crossing water – feeding the whole people of Israel with manna – an abundance of food. So here is this miracle teaching hearers that Jesus truly is the one whom prophets foretold.

Third... The 'tailpiece' of the account, revealing Jesus as Emmanuel – 'God-with-us' – no mistaking the presence of God in the person of Jesus: the creation obeying him by who the creation was made!

Finally, though, perhaps most important, we see Jesus 'taking, blessings, breaking and sharing'. Christians have seen this miracle as prefiguring the Holy Eucharist, the Last

Supper, in which Jesus takes, blesses, shares and breaks bread. It mirrors the Eucharist and is an allegory perhaps for the whole of Jesus' life – the ultimate sacrifice his being broken on the cross that we might share in the abundance of his life-giving love.

Doesn't this miracle tell you something of what the Christian life is about? That we are taken, blessed, broken, shared?

We're taken when we make the decision to find out more about Jesus by joining the dance and trying to be a part of the family of the church. In taking that step, God smiles on us and rejoices and gives thanks: God indeed blesses us to be a blessing in the world.

We're broken too: the Christian life is one of sacrifice, not selfishness: it's what the Dali Lama and Desmond Tutu speak of: giving ourselves makes us stronger in our inner being.

And that helps us share the love of Christ for the world: God's powerful love which should sweep us off our feet. I love that image of the Christian life: that it is not like a cake (the more people you share it with, the less there is for everyone). It is more like a beautiful sunset or piece of music: the greater number of people come to see/hear it, the greater the joy, party and fun!

Which brings me back to where we started today. In the perplexing world which we inhabit, what possible difference can one person – you or me – make?

The fact is that the things that really matter, the truly significant dimensions of our world, are actually no greater than they ever were. They are still the dimensions of any responsible, thinking, loving, hoping human being. The world

may have changed, but our human condition – the need for affirmation, for joy, for compassion – hasn't.

And the saints of the past and present, and the words of scripture call out to us. Not as we'd like to be or pretend to be – but as we are: and say to us “may you be strengthened in your inner being, may Christ dwell in your heart, may you be rooted and grounded in love” – so that you may be sent in love to make a difference. Not some other person, some bigger man or better woman, some ‘more suitable’ person: rather, God calls you and me, through the strength of our inner being to make what love and hope and faith can of every situation we find ourselves in. In the strange muddle of the world, in all our failings and startings again, in our losses and joys: to be ‘alive to God’ and his love for us.

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Philip Banks, July 2018

¹ Dali Lama and Desmond Tutu: *The Book of Joy*, Hutchinson, 2016