Sermon for Trinity 3

Since retirement a decade ago, one of our pleasures has been to listen to Radio 4 Extra. One highlight has been the serialisation of old comedy shows and timeless mystery classics. These happened at lunchtimes and would accompany our lunch together. Sometimes we would be away in the middle of the day and we would miss a crucial episode –either missing part of the plot or, even worse, the concluding part when the perpetrator was revealed. Somehow one felt cheated or short-changed!

Over the years I have had a similar feeling about the readings we have in church. Times when we seem to skip a, to me, crucial step in the argument put forward by an epistle writer. Or a time when the lectionary misses out a telling parable in the gospel story.

But during our enforced time at home in ‘lockdown’ we have been able to hear every episode of the ‘whodunit’. Something similar has happened with today’s readings. It is one of the very rare times when today’s readings from Paul’s letter to the Romans and from the gospel attributed to Matthew follow on exactly from those which we read last week. I think Ann and Ian will confirm that we started today where they left off reading last week. More than that, they finish off a section or argument.

More of that a little later. First, I want to return to the reference to thrillers on Radio 4 Extra. A couple of weeks ago the thriller was a Lord Peter Whimsy classic by Dorothy L. Sayers. It was entitled “Murder must Advertise”. In an age when others have ‘borrowed’ some of our best slogans like “Mission Statements” and “Partnership Working” I thought it was time we borrowed one from someone else. So, in my view, the slogan for the present and future should be “Faith must Advertise.”

At a time when mental well-being is being recognised as an essential part of life alongside physical and economic well-being we need to be metaphorically on the front foot. It is all well and good allowing church buildings to be open again for private prayer. But faith is about more than buildings. Church is beyond bricks and stones as, led by Graham, we have shown in these Zoom services. The faith community is just that. A community that lives in and through faith. A community that is faithful to God’s love. A community which shows the love of God to all in acts of uncommon kindness – kindness which is not conditional – kindness which is not limited.

In recent self-isolating conditions showing kindness is something in which we have felt restricted – although we have been in receipt of great kindness from helpful neighbours and family. There was something symbolic this week in being able to give strawberries picked from our garden to both family and our closest neighbours.

The restrictions we have felt came to the fore on Father’s day. Sandra, who is a much more ‘touchy/feely’ person than me, was glad to see grandchildren but really sad not to be able to hug them. I on the other hand realised how much I had missed face to face communication. I was taught in school and theological college the value of non-verbal communication. How much you can learn about the feelings of a person through body language. However many telephone conversations we have they can’t replace seeing the whole person, face to face. It is why I readily confess that I am not good at praying with people over the telephone. I know others are, and perhaps I’m a little envious!

You may be thinking that this is all a big diversion from our two readings this morning. I beg to differ. Both end important chapters in their respective works. Both are, in their way, about discipleship. How we put faith into practice. How we live out what God wants of us. How we use the Spirit of God to show God’s love to the world.

The short passage from the gospel of Matthew comes at the end of a chapter almost entirely dedicated to aspects of discipleship. The gospel has a framework of interspersing stories and speeches, each linked to a theme. Chapter 10 is the second of the speeches, full of sayings about the nature of apostleship and being disciples. The passage we read concludes the speech with three practical ways in which discipleship is recognised. Each has a separate verse in the format we use today.

To be received in this context means the disciple is given food and listened to. Hospitality is important – although less than easy to show in this current time – it’s great of Ian to be using his garden to facilitate meeting people, socially distanced.

The second verse appears nowhere else in the New Testament, and may be something of a ‘two-edged sword’. A prophet will get a prophet’s reward. People don’t always like prophetic words – they would rather kill the messenger than heed the message. Perhaps in supporting equality for all races in the current day we need to recognise that in our religious history we have been party to inequalities of colour, status, and faith. “All are equal in the sight of God” is something which needs to be lived as well as proclaimed. To receive a prophet or righteous person is to take part in their work and share in their reward.

The final injunction is to look to the needs of others – even something as simple as a glass of water. Or, we might say ‘a cup of tea’. There are echoes here of the great parable in Chapter 25; “whatever you do for one of the least of these my brethren you do it to me”. If we ever have any doubts that ours is a practical faith we just need to go and read that chapter again!

In the first verse of chapter 6 of Romans Paul poses a question, “What shall we say then? Are we to continue in sin that grace may abound?” In more modern language, ‘should we sin more so that we get forgiven more?’ He spends the rest of the chapter answering his rhetorical question culminating in today’s first reading. Previously he has encouraged his readers not to be slaves to sin, not to be part of the world’s negative forces. Here he changes ‘tack’ to say that their new found faith is not a reason to sin at will. They may be under a new dispensation, the dispensation of God’s love. They have a new master to serve, God himself. Because they have been set free from sin they have been set free to offer obedience to God.

Like those who have gone before us we are called to be disciples. We are called to give up self and selfishness and live selflessly for others. We are called to walk the second mile, metaphorically as well as physically. We are called to offer hospitality to those of faith and those of none. We are called on to sustain ‘fellow-travellers’ as we go on the journey through life. We are called to be God’s people in the present time – just as Jesus called on his apostles follow God through the Spirit after he left their physical presence. Continue to be followers of Jesus in praise and thankfulness for all the blessings God has given us.

Amen.