Christ Church Cathedral
OXFORD

11 October 2020: Weekly Podcast
The Eighteenth Sunday after Trinity
The Very Revd Professor Martyn Percy, The Dean
Christians “Do God”: Suffering, Narrow Roads and Faithfulness

Introduction
A warm welcome to you from Christ Church Oxford for the Matins Sermon for the 18th Sunday of Trinity. My name is Martyn Percy, and I am the Dean of Christ Church, and so I bid you welcome on behalf of this Cathedral, College and all the members of this Foundation and House of Christ.

Our structure for these podcasts has changed slightly in recent weeks. You are going to hear the two readings appointed for Matins this morning – Isaiah 50 and a passage from Luke 13 – and then a ten-minute sermon. We shall be reflecting on the cost of following Jesus. I will then lead some prayers for us, and we will conclude with the Lord’s Prayer using traditional language, and I hope you will join in. May God bless and keep you as you listen, and be assured of our prayers for you at this time, wherever you are.

Isaiah 50:4–10
The Lord GOD has given me
the tongue of a teacher,
that I may know how to sustain
the weary with a word.
Morning by morning he wakens—
wakens my ear
to listen as those who are taught.
The Lord GOD has opened my ear,
and I was not rebellious,
I did not turn backward.
I gave my back to those who struck me,
and my cheeks to those who pulled out the beard;
I did not hide my face
from insult and spitting.
The Lord GOD helps me;
therefore I have not been disgraced;
therefore I have set my face like flint,
and I know that I shall not be put to shame;
he who vindicates me is near.
Who will contend with me?
Let us stand up together.
Who are my adversaries?
Let them confront me.
It is the Lord GOD who helps me;
who will declare me guilty?
All of them will wear out like a garment;
the moth will eat them up.
Who among you fears the LORD
and obeys the voice of his servant,
who walks in darkness
and has no light,
yet trusts in the name of the LORD
and relies upon his God?

There ends the first reading.

Jesus went through one town and village after another, teaching as he made his way to Jerusalem.
Someone asked him, “Lord, will only a few be saved?” He said to them, “Strive to enter through the narrow door; for many, I tell you, will try to enter and will not be able. When once the owner of the house has got up and shut the door, and you begin to stand outside and to knock at the door, saying, ‘Lord, open to us,’ then in reply he will say to you, ‘I do not know where you come from.’ Then you will begin to say, ‘We ate and drank with you, and you taught in our streets.’ But he will say, ‘I do not know where you come from; go away from me, all you evildoers!’ There will be weeping and gnashing of teeth when you see Abraham and Isaac and Jacob and all the prophets in the kingdom of God, and you yourselves thrown out. Then people will come from east and west, from north and south, and will eat in the kingdom of God. Indeed, some are last who will be first, and some are first who will be last.”
There ends the second reading

Sermon

May I speak in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

We live in interesting times. Not only is the church battling with Covid-19, along with the rest of the world, but we also have to battle with reports that say the Church is not to be trusted – and the findings of IICSA, the Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse this week – bear this out. Yet current ecclesial culture thinks that if we could only just “do” church better (i.e., whether ‘messy’, ‘fresh’, ‘traditional’ or ‘alternative’, etc.), many more would flood through the doors.

I have a retort: “Don’t Do Church – Do God!” To contradict the words of Alastair Campbell, who butted into an interview for Vanity Fair when Tony Blair was the Prime Minister and asked about his Christian faith, with “I’m sorry, we don’t do God” (Daily Telegraph 5 May 2003). Actually, Christians are meant to “do God”. That is the point of being a Christian.

In saying “do God”, let us not underestimate the cost of discipleship. Christianity can easily collapse into niceness and politeness, with true charity being substituted for mere civility. Too often, Christians are happy to be witnesses, but not activists. We watch and comment as bystanders, but we do not get involved. Afraid of taking sides, inaction is exactly what permits – in the memorable phrase of Hannah Arendt – the banality of evil to flourish. Churches develop, all too easily, a kind of institutional muteness, selective blindness and partial deafness.

Jesus was different, and in his ministry keenly sensate towards pain and injustice, as well as apathy and indifference. We are called to be the body of Christ. Courage and wisdom to act is what is needed. Being a Christian means “doing God”. This intriguing poem by Piers Plowright contrasts Jesus with some fickle alternatives:

Considering the other Gods
Would you really want them round your place?
Thor banging about in the hall
Kali destroying the kitchen
Aphrodite coming on strong
In the bedroom - then turning nasty.
All tricksy, changeable - to hell with right and wrong.
I think I’ll stick with Jesus:
His half-smile, fierce love,
Amazing Grace.

Mind you, he too could send the plates flying,
Turn things upside down,
The maddened swine stampeding
Into the wine-dark sea,
The wrong pardoned,
And all that crying.

Still he's the one for me
As the world darkens
And drunk captains run the ship.
He's there, in the eye of the storm,
On the cruel tree, facing it down,
Throwing across time and space,
Beyond ambition, pride, the dip of Fate,
A thin line of light
That we can grab before we drown. (Plowright, 2019)

Those “drunk captains [that] run the ship” tell us that we often have the wrong leaders in politics and religion. They are often inebriated with their own propaganda, and obsessed with their reputation and legacy. Jesus is not interested. He is humiliated on the cross in the eyes of the world. But in the being of God, this is humility: “obedient unto death, even death on a cross.” Or, as Plowright has it, “on the cruel tree, facing it down” turns out be our true lifeline – that “thin line of light” we can now clutch lest we drown in our own hubris.

But it is costly to go against the grain, and swim against the current; to recognise that in our following Jesus, we become expendable. One of my theological heroes is the Irish Dominican Fr. Herbert McCabe (1926-2001). I only heard him lecture a couple of times, but it was electrifying. As editor of New Blackfriars, he called for nuclear disarmament, inveighed against the US involvement in Vietnam, and as a friend of John Hume took a constructive and passionate interest in solving the Northern Irish Troubles. The Vatican edged him out of the editorship of New Blackfriars, but he regained his position in 1970, and began with these words: “As I was saying before I was so oddly interrupted...”.

McCabe was a radical precisely because of his loyalty to orthodoxy and tradition, not in spite of it. He saw that the tradition we follow was deeply subversive of the prevailing powers and forces at
work in our world. His theological writing resounds with pithy aphorisms. “Jesus died of being human” was one. And perhaps most tellingly of all for us, he wrote that “if you don’t love, you’re dead; and if you do love they’ll kill you.” I hope he would have agreed with me when I say that Christianity is not a faith of subscription, but of conscription: we are not paying for a service. We are serving and the one who has already paid. To follow Jesus is to waive your rights, not exercise your choices on a take-it-or-leave it basis. Christianity is a duty, obligation and joy.

So at the centre of his faith, and ours, is this figure of Jesus, who in one sense could be seen as a failed, reviled, humiliated political criminal from Palestine, and whose execution was a grim warning-sign of how far the powers of this world are prepared to go when their interests are threatened. But that is the narrow way we travel too, because if we follow Jesus, we cannot take the easy road. For McCabe, as for me, and perhaps you too, God was and is a matter of weakness rather than power. Jesus’ humility and sacrifice is a willed-way-of-being. The subversive power of Jesus comes through the incarnation and the cross. Power made perfect in weakness is what Jesus is ultimately about: humble and obedient “unto death.” Then, and only then, can there be resurrection. Do not cling to what you think will keep you going.

Let go; let God.
Amen.

Intercessions
Let us be still and at peace.

In the power of the Spirit and in union with Christ, let us pray to God, our creator and redeemer.

The Church of Christ
Lord, teach us as a Church to travel light. In our pilgrimage towards your heavenly kingdom, may we use our resources to serve you, and not be weighed down with all that holds us back. May we draw comfort from the thought that we are not alone, but travelling the same road as our Christian sisters and brothers. Help us as your church with your world, and in your love. Through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Creation, Society, the Sovereign and all Those in Authority
Lord, you ask for our hands: we may give them for a moment, then withdraw them, for the work was hard. You ask for our mouths to speak out against injustice: yet we give you a whisper that we might not be accused. You ask for our eyes to see the pain of poverty: yet we close them for
we do not want to see. You ask for our lives, that you might work through us: yet we gave a small part, that we might not get too involved. Lord, forgive us, renew us, and send us out as instruments of your love, care and justice in your name. Through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Our Nation and Local Communities
Lord, the source of our common life, we pray for those peoples and places divided and torn apart by the ravages of war, strife, enmity, suffering, disease and disaster. As a world, we are divided and isolated, and yet we long for the hope of community. Grant us the vision to work for those we shall never know, but whose lives are linked with ours, and whose shared ground we stand on and whose common air we breathe. When we are divided and alone, breathe on us with your Spirit, that we may joyfully stand together with all your creation, strive for peace, and honour your name. Amen.

Those Who Suffer
We keep a moment of quiet to remember those who we know are anxious or distressed in body mind or spirit, and have asked for our prayers, and those who have no-one to pray or care for them.

Lord, we pray for those whose acquaintance with fear, suffering and grief is greater than they feel able to bear. Teach us all to trust where we cannot see, walking in the light we have: your light which illumines our path and shows us the way. Help us to hold to the knowledge that you will never leave us or forsake us; and that even in the valley of the shadow of death, you are there to walk with us and comfort us. Through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

The Communion of Saints
Lord, may we recognise the glory of your life and love throughout the universe, and where darkness and doubt will one day pass away. Open our eyes that we may see the promise of redemption that we glimpse in your heavenly kingdom, and where we find the communion of saints, and may brush the wings of angels. Then shall we know as we are known, and shall feast at that table where you live and reign with all your saints, for ever and ever. Amen.

The Lord's Prayer – we join all our hearts and minds together in the words that Jesus taught us:

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name; thy kingdom come;
thy will be done; on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us. Lead us not into temptation; but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom, the power and the glory, for ever and ever. Amen.

The Grace: The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with us all, evermore. Amen.