



# *Christ Church Cathedral*

## OXFORD

**26 July 2020: Matins Sermon**

**The Seventh Sunday after Trinity**

**Song of Solomon 2, I Peter 4:7–14**

**The Very Revd Professor Martyn Percy, The Dean**

If you have ever watched 'The Simpsons', you will almost certainly have a favourite character or two – one with whom you identify, or perhaps admire. Oddly – I don't know why – I just love Montague Burns; he really amuses me, and I have a sneaking admiration for his steely ruthlessness. A character, however, that almost nobody admires is Ned Flanders – the caricature of a fundamentalist Christian who lives next door to Homer and Marge. But as I sometimes say to students, with more than 50% of Americans going to church, and half of them going to churches like Ned's, you have a 1 in 3 chance of having a Ned as your neighbour if you live in the USA. Like all good characters, Ned's virtues and vices are pushed to mild extremes. You can borrow anything off Ned – and not give it back. Ever. Because the Bible says don't ask for it back; so don't. The Simpson household is actually full of Ned's stuff – a TV table, power tools, a lawnmower – to name but a few.

Ned is a fool for Christ. He loves God, and he loves his neighbour, even though the Simpsons should really be in receipt of a weekly ASBO. Moreover, Ned Flanders lives his life preparing for the end – a day when God will come, there will be judgment, and we will be weighed by how much we have loved. Including our bad neighbours and our enemies.

Two of the great biblical passages are set before us this morning. The first is concerned with love – and often used at wedding services. It is a love poem of power and passion, barely concealing its underlying eroticism: full of desire, longing, pining and panting. The Song of Solomon is often seen as an analogy of Christ's love for the Church, and our desire for union with God, and God with us.

The second reading is in two parts; first, presciently echoing our Prime Minister, we are asked to stay alert! Because, these times are dangerous. But then the reading goes on to advocate an undefended approach to living: to be a person and people of also excessive love. We are even to

love those who might do or mean us harm. How should we live? Ned Flanders has read the Great Commandments; love your neighbour as yourself. So he is always good to Homer – whatever the cost.

You might be forgiven for thinking that when Jesus utters the Sermon on the Mount, he had taken a day trip away from reality. Bless those who curse you? Is he serious? Surely ‘take it on the chin, but remember that revenge is a dish best eaten cold’. Plan now; strike later. But in some respects, this is what Jesus is driving at. The Sermon on the Mount, like so much of the New Testament, is not a litany of doctrine, a list of commandments or a book of rules. Instead, we are given stories, exhortations and examples. The New Testament is not rule-restricting so much as it is character building. Be good to those who are mean to you; love those who hate you; bless those who persecute you.

Which brings me back to characters, for a moment. Working on the assumption that we don’t model our life on Ned Flanders, Mr. Burns or Smithers, to say nothing of Bart, Marge or Homer, but rather struggle to emulate Jesus, what kinds of characters shape our lives? To whom do we look for example or inspiration? Perhaps a familiar figure from your life? For me, I find my inspiration in outsiders – figures such as Desmond Tutu, Nelson Mandela, Gandhi – and perhaps especially Martin Luther King Jr., who suffer for their convictions, yet their love shines through the persecutions they endure. All four of my figures are non-white, and spent time in prison. Yes, black lives matter.

For obvious reasons, perhaps, with recent and current events here and in the USA, I have been reflecting on the continual battles for equality in the southern states of America, forty years on after the ‘I have a Dream’ speech of Martin Luther King, a young pastor from Atlanta, who spoke at the culmination of the Civil Rights March at Washington DC. Even today, a drive through the southern states of the USA, from Atlanta, Georgia, through Birmingham, Alabama, to Memphis, Tennessee, hard up against the banks of the Mississippi, it is not hard to imagine the power of King’s words against a background of powerlessness. The urban decay and poverty that King’s communities knew so well is still much in evidence; states ‘sweltering with the heat of oppression’ still wait to be transformed into oases of freedom and justice. For many, the dream lives on; it is not yet fulfilled:

‘...one day on the red hills of Georgia sons of former slave owners will be able to sit down together at the table of brotherhood...I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the colour of their skin but by the

content of their character...that one day, right there in Alabama, little black boys and black girls will be able to join hands with white boys and white girls as sisters and brothers...'

Martin Luther King Jr. had a dream too. Not a dream in the ordinary sense of the word; but a dream that was on a par with those contained in many biblical epics, including the kinds that the scripture alludes to. It is a dream of a new heaven and a new earth, in which there is liberty, restoration and salvation.

But Martin Luther King's dream was also rooted in experience – very much the kind of circumstances that Jesus alludes to in the Sermon on the Mount. On December 2nd, 1955, Rosa Parks, a black woman from Montgomery Alabama, was asked to vacate her seat so a white person could sit down. The bus regulations in the city – devised by the invidious Jim Crow - segregated seating on buses between whites and blacks, and required a black person to give up their seat to a white person upon request.

Rosa Parks was tired, and refused. The police were called, and she was arrested and booked for violating the city bus ordinances. What would have been a nightmare for most people became a historic opportunity for black people in the Deep South: 'all men are created equal before God', a foundation of the American Constitution, could be tested in the Supreme Court against the segregationist ordinances of a city. King's dream of justice and equality had begun.

King's dream that was birthed within a quite particular and essentialist theological foundations: a prophetic appeal to a nation that echoes down the ages, calling for an end to oppression and injustice, and a society rooted in an ecology of abundant love. Echoing the sermon on the mount, his last speech leaves us speechless:

'Every now and then I think about my own death, and I think about my own funeral. I don't think about it in a morbid sense. Every now and then I ask myself, "What is it that I would want said?" And I leave the word to you this morning. If any of you are around when I have to meet my day, I don't want a long funeral. And if you get somebody to deliver the eulogy, tell them not to talk too long. Tell them not to mention that I have a Nobel Peace Prize. That isn't important. Tell them not to mention that I have three or four hundred other awards. That's not important...

I'd like someone to mention that day, that Martin Luther King Jr. tried to give his life serving others. I'd like for somebody to say that Martin Luther King Jr. tried to love somebody. I

want you to say that day that I tried to be right on the war question. I want you to be able to say that I did try to feed the hungry. I want you to be able to say that I did try to clothe the naked...that I tried to love and serve humanity.... all of the other shallow things will not matter. I won't have any money to leave behind. I won't have the fine and luxurious things of life to leave behind. But I just want to leave a committed life behind. And that's all I want to say...'

Where does all this leave us? Few of us have the opportunity to lead a people out of bondage into liberty. Few of us can hope to live the exemplary life set out before us in Matthew's version of the Great Commandment. So what can we do? Three things, I'd suggest.

First, as Martin Luther King Jr. says, live 'the committed life'; if Christianity were a crime in this country, would there be enough evidence to convict us?

Second, slavery can be an insidious thing. But God is the deliverer. We sometimes need to look for very clear ways out or through situations, for ourselves and especially for others. To learn not to put up with bondage. The gospel is freedom, not suffering in chains.

Third, remember that true religion is always love and not reward. It is in giving that we receive; in dying that we are born; love is all there is. And it must triumph if there is to be true freedom.

The Christian duty in today is very much like the one we have in our readings today. To love across boundaries and barriers. To love our neighbour as we would ourselves. Whether we win or lose in life, love or politics, Jesus calls us to love. It is pretty well the only thing he commands us to do. And strangely, it is the only way by which the world can survive and thrive.