

First Sunday of Lent 2017

Romans 5: 12 – 19; Matthew 4: 1 – 11

For a number of weeks now the Priory's notice sheet has included the Leading your Church into Growth prayer. We have incorporated the prayer into most of our services – although it is difficult to incorporate it into the very prescriptive text of Matins. It arises from a Leading your Church into Growth conference that three of us went on last September. In the remainder of this year we shall be going through a programme at the Priory to help us consider how we, as a worshipping community, can lead our church into growth. Using the prayer each week is a sort of drip, drip, drip introduction to the programme that follows.

If you look at the prayer printed on the notice sheet you will see that we are seeking the assistance of the Holy Spirit for us to grow in three ways. The first way is about growing in numbers. It's very easy to be all snooty about this and say, no, we're not interested in

bums on seats; we're interested in spiritual integrity. But actually we are, unashamedly, interested in bums on seats. Jesus' great commission to us is to go and make disciples of as many people as possible. We want everybody to hear and respond to the good news of Jesus Christ. And we shouldn't feel we've done enough even if every seat in the Priory has a bum on it.

But the point is that, whilst it might be about bums on seats, it's about *more than* bums on seats. Because the third sort of growth we seek is in service to our local community. There's no point in having hundreds and hundreds of people with inane grins on their face, blathering on about how much they love Jesus, if it does nothing to bring in the Kingdom. Christianity is about more than offering a religious fix: it's about entering into partnership with God to transform communities to make them more harmonious, just and sustainable places.

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And then there's the middle bit: the prayer for the Holy Spirit to help the church to grow in spiritual commitment. We want to grow in our discipleship by being more committed and obedient in our faith. And that's the bit, the middle bit, the bit about growing in commitment and obedience to our faith, that we emphasise in this season of Lent. It's what Lent – this season of preparation for Easter – is all about.

During these weeks of Lent we shall be going on a journey, a long, deep and spiritually painful journey with Jesus. On that journey we shall be contemplating how we can be obedient to Jesus. It reflects or mirrors the journey of contemplation Jesus himself underwent and which we heard about in this morning's second reading. Having been born, nurtured in the home of Joseph and Mary and grown into maturity, Jesus was baptised. When he was baptised he received the Holy Spirit to commission him into his earthly ministry. He had then to work out how he could obediently exercise that commission.

And the options with which Jesus wrestled were fairly subtly divided. Wouldn't it be great to eradicate hunger, to eradicate the oppressive abuse of power and to be able to demonstrate incontrovertibly the majesty of God at the drop of a hat? I tell you, when I hear that the food banks in Bridlington are desperately short of stock; when I hear that there are children in our parish arriving at school unable to concentrate because there's been no food in their homes to give them breakfast; I would just love to go to the north beach and pray the power of Jesus to turn those stones into bread to give to the kids of our parish. I really would. And actually, it can be quite hard to accept that the Bible tells us that Jesus concluded that that way of operating wasn't obedient to his Father's will.

Jesus concluded that being obedient to his Father was about being so attentive to him that he didn't notice a mere thing like being hungry for forty days. That obedience led him to the cross; and St. Paul tells us, in the first reading we had this morning, that it is

through that obedience that we are made righteous, that we are justified.

When I came to the Priory three and half years ago, one of the things that tickled me was that it's the only church I've been at that has a vending machine. In the corner, by the choir vestry, there's a Fairtrade drinks vending machine. You put in 50p, you press some buttons and out comes from the bottom a cup of coffee or hot chocolate or whatever. It can be tempting to think of the way we are saved by Jesus as being a bit like that vending machine, only what comes out of the bottom is our salvation rather than a cup of hot chocolate.

It can be tempting to think that salvation occurs as a result of some sort of transaction. Jesus puts something in to the slot at the top of the machine. The Bible uses all sorts of metaphors to try to grasp in words what that something might be: ransom money, payment of a debt, sacrificial blood, punishment or, in

the case of this morning's reading, a free gift. But in order to perform the transaction; in order to make the insertion of whatever it is in the vending machine produce the hot chocolate of salvation out of the spout at the bottom; we've got to do something that is the equivalent of pressing the buttons: we have to have faith. Jesus provides the currency, we have faith and we receive salvation.

I'm sure people who have been around churches for years will have heard sermons like that. It's popular theology. But it's old fashioned theology. For forty years or more theologians have been looking at the relationship between Jesus and faith and the Jewish law through a new perspective. Their objections to the old fashioned, popular way of looking at it are

1. that it makes faith through Jesus a replacement for doing the works required by Jewish law; which makes the Jewish faith redundant; which is frankly a bit anti-Semitic; and

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2. that it turns making sure we have sufficient faith to make those buttons on the vending machine produce salvation as much like hard work as performing the works required by the Law of Moses.

So the new perspective says that justification is not about how we obtain salvation, it's not about getting in; it's about staying in, about the way we know that we are in and preserve our identity as Christians.

We don't have to do anything to get in. Jesus loves everyone. To be confirmed and assured in that identity of being loved, all we have to do is be attentive to him, as Jesus was attentive to his Father during those 40 days in the wilderness. And that's why I'm so pleased that through the inspiration and leadership of Reader Jean, part of our lantern discipline at the Priory this year is simply to attend on Jesus through Taizé reflections every Monday at 7.00pm, here in church.

Amen.