St Andrews, St Andrews 22.09.13

Confirmation

Part of series on 1 Timothy – 1 Tim 2: 1-7

Harvest

I sat in front of a blank computer screen pondering how I might manage today without preaching three sermons. Dorian’s confirmation – an important moment of commitment on his faith journey. Harvest Thanksgiving – a reminder of God’s goodness in creation and of how thanksgiving lies at the heart of the a life of faith. And finally your series of sermons on the First Letter of Paul to Timothy.

I did as we all do in these moments – diversionary tactics. I visited the outer reaches of my desk and found myself on a tour of the world church. There was a card from Archbishop Bartholomew Daniel Deng Bol of Sudan – and I thought about a conversation with him about what happens when you partition countries, thinking of both Sudan and Ireland. Next was a card from Elijah Fung, Director of the HIV Education Centre at St John’s Cathedral, Hong Kong. Alison and I arrived there at the end of the Pet Service and there were snakes. But further down was a Confirmation Card – dating back to a Confirmation Service which I took part in for pupils who are members of our church at Kilgraston School. Friday 15 June, 2012, the Feast of the Sacred Heart. It said, ‘Think deeply, speak gently, love much, laugh often, work hard, give freely, pay promptly, pray earnestly and be kind.’ I gave that about five out of ten – it didn’t say much to me about faith commitment – about how transformative it is – about how the act of walking up to that commitment and saying it, as Dorian will do today, is part of the journey in which Jesus enters into our lives and transforms them. So how about this: ‘Believe passionately and question creatively; live joyfully; serve with prayerful humility; practise forgiveness; embrace sacrifice

Harvest Thanksgivings were a big thing in my Church of Ireland past. People would travel from one to another. Harvest decorations did bountiful rather than subtle. We sang ‘Come ye thankful people come’ and ‘We plough the fields and scatter’ and thanked God for the plenty which we enjoy. And somehow we dimly recognised that to be thankful for plenty while others starved was inadequate both in terms of justice and of faith. So we thought about sharing – but found it really difficult once again to get in touch with the transformative power of Christian faith. I’ve travelled enough to have seen real poverty. I’m always interested in the extent to which I am comparatively unmoved by it. My sense of the commonality of all human life in the sight of God – made in his image and likeness – is somehow lost in the otherness of the experience and the need to protect myself from it.

Which brings us back to Paul writing to Timothy – prayers for everybody, for kings and all who are in high positions, so that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and dignity’ Not prayers to kings – and certainly not to the Roman Emperor. Prayers which implicitly believe that God responds to prayers and blesses the lives of all – indeed God desires the salvation of all. I believe that – I’ve been reflecting on the experience of being prayed for not just as your bishop but like any other person facing illness. ‘Does it do any good?’ asks the voice of reason in my head. Well yes it does – I think that whatever moments I manage to be better than my instincts comes down to that.

And finally Paul goes on to affirm the place of Jesus, the mediator between God and humankind who gave himself a ransom for all. We believe that the key event in the whole drama of human life is the action of God in Christ through which sinful humanity is restored. And if it applies to the whole drama of human life, it applies to you and me. It applies to Dorian at this point in his faith journey. It applies to our self-indulgent world in which we can obsess because there are only eight kinds of butter on the supermarket shelf – while much of humanity is in need.

And in that truth, Paul finds his calling as an apostle. In that truth we live our lives and find our calling to share the Good News of Jesus Christ.