

June 28th 2020 Sermon for 3rd Sunday after Trinity –

Rev Tony Rindl, Vicar of St Mary's Church Watford

Bible Reading Romans 6:12-end

Gospel Reading Matthew 10:40-end

May I speak to you in the name of the living God who is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen. It was about two years ago, it was just after Christmas in actual fact, that this lovely Iranian couple came to St Marys for the first time. And I had the privilege of talking to them after the service. Now what became very apparent to me is that actually they were rather distressed. You might even say that they were traumatised. They'd only recently come to the UK having fled from Iran. They were converts to Christianity and as a result their lives were in danger. They faced persecution. They had to escape and come to this country. So you can imagine the conversation we had was one that was full of emotion, and they really struggled really to be able to tell me coherently what had happened and why they were here. It got to a point in the conversation where I had to just pause and say to them "Enough, thank you for telling me your story, now I want to share my story" and what I shared with them on that occasion, is that actually I am the son of a refugee. My father aged 8 had to escape from Austria in 1939. You can imagine the relief on their faces as I told them this, because they realised that a person in authority, the vicar, actually understood where they were coming from because his own father was also a refugee. So they realised that in myself, there was somebody who at least recognised something of the trauma and the pain of having to flee your home country to find refuge.

Now I'm not going to say that on this occasion I welcomed in prophets or a righteous person, although I do see this couple as righteous people. But what I do know is that we welcomed into our church family that day a couple who had left everything behind in order to follow Jesus Christ, and I think we've been richly rewarded by their faith, and their fellowship within our church community. I personally have learnt so much more about Persian culture and history. I've learned more about the Middle East which in turn has informed how I understand many of the stories in the Bible. And I think I've also understood a little bit more about the persecution of Christians, not only in Iran but in other parts of the world as well.

Indeed, St Marys is a wonderfully diverse congregation and we have within our midst Christians from Pakistan and China and Nigeria. Countries where persecution of Christians exists even today. We also are joined by people from many other countries, speak many different languages, many different cultures, many different social backgrounds but there's something wonderful about how we are united because of our common understanding of the Good News of Jesus Christ.

One of the things we are still learning as a church community and we challenge ourselves on this – is how do we do our Worship, our Welcome, and our Witness better. And one of the things we've learned is that our Welcome has to include everyone. If the Gospel is not Good News for everyone then it is not Good News at all. Yes, the Gospel is about love and forgiveness and new life and new purpose. It brings with it hope and joy and peace to many. But it is also about justice and equality. Without justice and equality there is no Good News. And I think this is why the recent Black Lives Matter campaign is so important.

Yes of course all life matters as some are quick to point out. But Black Lives Matter is about redressing a particular injustice that quite frankly has gone on for far too long. Its also about prejudice and its about racism.

Here I go back to my Dad's story and the fact that he was a holocaust survivor, and that his parents, my grandparents, died at the hands of the Nazis. Now many people have wondered how the Nazis ever came to power and were able to commit so many atrocities. Well I guess the history of Europe is complex. But the truth is in the holocaust there are victims, there are perpetrators, but there are also a lot of bystanders; people who did nothing to challenge the Nazi ideology, who did nothing to challenge prejudice. The very first thing that I learnt in holocaust studies is that the holocaust happened in modern times. And I remember protesting with the tutor at the time, saying that it happened a long time ago, my father was just a young boy at that time. But the truth of the matter is that the holocaust not only happened in living memory, but it happened in a country where there was a modern form of government so what happened in the 1930s and 1940s could happen today, and especially if prejudice is allowed to happen without being challenged. We already see the emergence of far-right politics is gaining popularity and in some ways we might want to consider its just a small minority. But it often goes unchecked and we know what happens. History teaches us what happens if we don't challenge prejudice.

So a word about the removal of statues of those who were involved in the slave trade. I guess like many things its not that straight forward. But what I do know that as a son of a holocaust survivor, the pain is passed down through the generations. And I think that that must be true for those who have been affected by slavery, who know that their great great grandparents were slaves. The pain simply doesn't go away. And I know that if I saw a statue of someone who was known to have been a prominent Nazi, no matter what good they may have done in society, I would be deeply offended if there was a statue on public display to them. We have to learn the lessons of the past in order that we might build a better future.

At my father's funeral back in January, many commented on the fact that Dad had no bitterness towards those who caused his family such harm. And what I do know about my Dad is, that he was a teacher, and I'd like to think that he taught us well. And one of the most important lessons that he taught us was the value of tolerance. That we must have a high regard for those who are different, knowing that actually there is much to learn from different cultures and different backgrounds.

The writer of the letter to the Hebrews tells us to exercise hospitality. "Do not forget to show hospitality to strangers, for by so doing some people have shown hospitality to angels without knowing it". So let us endeavour to welcome those who are different, those who may well be messengers of God, they might be prophets, they might be righteous people, they may be people who are seeking to be disciples of Jesus Christ. Know this, the righteous are those who follow the basic commands of God, to love God, and to love their neighbour whoever their neighbour is, and without prejudice.

So let us make sure that we are counted amongst those who are called righteous, and welcome those who are different. And let us stand up against any form of prejudice and let us receive our reward; deep friendships, great understanding and so much more besides. Amen.