

For the preacher who seeks to root their sermon in the bible and contemporary life; this week offers a wide choice and somewhat of a dilemma. We are now only 4 days away from a general election that is predicted to produce a coalition government. This Friday, 8th May, marks 70 years since Victory in Europe towards the end of the Second World War in 1945 (in August we will mark the end of the war with the anniversary of VJ day). Our bible readings are rich indeed; we have the story of the Ethiopian Eunuch court official returning home from worshipping in Jerusalem and puzzling over the scriptures and the disciple Philip being sent to explain the good news of Jesus Christ and perform an impromptu roadside baptism; the second reading from one of the letters of John that has one of the most profound analysis of Christian love in the New Testament; and in our Gospel reading we have the image of Jesus the true vine and ourselves as the branches, growing out and bearing the fruit that are the tangible signs of our discipleship.

Love – that generosity of spirit, openness of heart and willingness to put oneself out or on the line for the benefit of others (as opposed to the “lurve” of romantic novels, songs and films) is perhaps the lens through which we might look at some of these events and our readings.

The Second World War saw approximately 700,000 killed and wounded service personnel from this country with just over 90,000 civilian casualties. Total worldwide casualties were in excess of 50 million. It was a war of hardships both on the home front and active service with tough conditions and privations on land, sea and air and rationing and other disruptions to daily life. Whatever our reasons for going to war there is no doubt that hardship and death were faced everyday by ordinary people because they believed that a better world could be built in victory.

For Christians it was perhaps a time for deciding how their discipleship of Christ affected their interaction with their neighbours and government policies and how they saw the call to military service. For many of those directly affected by oppressive regimes it was a time to live out dangerously God’s law of love in a world where opposition was punishable by death.

In Germany itself the institution of the church struggled to resist the government, largely preferring to be left in peace to worship rather than live in constant conflict with the Nazi state. But there were those who were prepared to put themselves on the line for the sake of Christ. “The cost of discipleship” is a book written by a German theologian and pastor called Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Bonhoeffer worked secretly to overthrow the Nazi regime and assassinate Hitler and visited Britain several times to highlight the active discrimination, later genocide and the resistance that was taking place. Arrested in 1943, he continued to lobby and write from prison whilst he had access to writing materials but was eventually moved to the camp of Buchenwald and executed on 9 April 1945, just over 70 years ago. Bonhoeffer describes the life of a Christian as one called to a life of love and service in the “pure word of Jesus”, a life of “costly grace”.

Bonhoeffer was never formally convicted of his crime but in the pattern of Christ and the words of Isaiah that the Eunuch was reading in his chariot in our passage from the book of Acts, he was himself “led to the slaughter and like a lamb silent before it’s shearer

.....justice was denied him.....(and) his life is taken away from the earth.”

Our reading from the gospel of John gives the words of Jesus Christ on the night before he died as he spoke to his disciples in the upper room. Jesus says he is the vine and we are the branches. If you know anything about viticulture (as it is called) or vine training you will know that the core of the vine is the old and established part and it is the branches that are trained and pruned to optimise the production of fruit. Jesus makes it quite clear that he and his word and his own life of obedience and love are that which nourish us, and enable us to bear the fruit which is the living out of our own lives doing, sharing and reflecting the love of God. “Because (it says in the first letter of John) as he (God) is, so are we in this world”.

Bonhoeffer and numerous others put themselves daily in danger because God lived in them and they lived and died in that knowledge and their fruit led to the democracy that we enjoy.

Like me, you may well be feeling fatigued with all the coverage of the General Election campaign. The newspapers, television and radio all carry daily reports that seem to focus on squabbles about where particular policies have or haven't worked, name calling and declarations about which parties might be prepared to work with each other if forced to by no clear majority. It is hard to discern where the debate on policies for any new government focuses on working together for the common good rather than political point scoring. The campaigning seems to take place on social media rather than the doorstep.

But the fight for our democracy and the anniversaries to mark a turning point in our living in peace, demand that each of us as Christians look for those people who will represent us not because they wish to be in power but because they wish to work for justice in all God's world – home and abroad, for the environment as well as all people. Most politicians shy away from declaring their faith because they seem afraid that this will affect their popularity and sometimes they inflate their claim to faith perhaps because they think it will help their popularity. We need to seek integrity and a willingness to serve, the love of the created world and all our brothers and sisters in it. I challenge each of us to pray about who we will vote for this coming Thursday that a better deal for the marginalised, the poor and the needy is the outcome and a glimpse of the Kingdom of God may be found in our country.

How wonderful it would be if we each saw this as an opportunity to reach out as a branch of the true vine, Jesus the Son of God, and hope that the fruit of our faith in voting prayerfully will have a positive impact for the world outside ourselves.

I remind us again of the words of today's Collect:

Risen Christ,
your wounds declare your love for the world
and the wonder of your risen life:
Give us compassion and courage
to risk ourselves for those we serve,
to the glory of God the Father. Amen