

Sermon 11th July 2021. Readings Ephesians 1:3-14. Mark 6:14-29

I have some good meditations that are based on bible scripture. Members of our Oakworth Mothers' Union may remember us doing some of them in the past together. They try to relax you and get you to focus enough so that you can put yourself into the scene of the story. There is a stark contrast between the one where Jesus calls the disciples on the shore, with its imagery that takes you to a peaceful sea and sunshine, well it does in my mind anyway! And the one that takes us through Jesus' last earthly journey towards the cross, especially having to enter into the extremely violent crucifixion scene. It would certainly surprise or even confuse people if you were to tell them that it was that one that was your favourite and most used meditation! Surely that one is best kept purely for Lent leading up to Easter. It is always tempting to skip that one altogether and to just do the resurrected Jesus, Easter Day one, where we celebrate all the hope, peace, joy and love we can freely receive into our hearts and lives, from him.

If you had a choice for meditation on both our readings today, which one would you choose?

Try to imagine you were reading them or hearing them for the very first time, not always easy if you have delved deeper into a particular bible story many times, perhaps at homegroup or other. If you have, then you could get bogged down with stuff like context, backgrounds of the characters, history, geography, theological differences, authors, time written, on your mind. A lot to clear out first before reaching relaxation stage, to simply enter into a scene, or to put ourselves into someone else's shoes in the story.

That is just like life though isn't it. Any meditation can be difficult, especially lately, and all that we may be going through in life, loss, bad health, difficult decisions regarding the virus to consider, etc. making reaching relaxation stage, to focus, to feel the benefits and wellbeing of any meditation, a difficult one.

Would you choose the one from Mark's gospel where you picture yourself at the banquet, invited by the rich and powerful Herod and his wife Herodias alongside people in high standing in government, army office, or other important influential people of Galilee. Watching the entertainment, eating the abundance of food and drink, socialising, and feeling successful or important enough to be invited to celebrate Herod's birthday. Maybe not relaxing meditation wise but great to be at a big party. Watching the entertaining dance of Herodias' daughter, sharing in that 'delight' as described in verse 22 with the other guests. Herod asks her what she would like, and he would give it to her. Then the dancer leaves the room, comes back and asks for 'the head of John the Baptist, on a plate'.

The horror of that request, that imagery, when Herod weakly gives the order for it to happen, against his own better judgement, and what it would look like, as an end to a party, or anywhere, is horrific and best left for TV and film these days, or to remain detached from it emotionally, as being ancient scripture, too old and culturally different to emotionally affect us any longer. The whole background and context surrounding John the Baptist's execution, is like something out of the drama Game of Thrones, or films.

Or would you choose Ephesians where, as the Christian community, we are reminded, with uniting, comforting and hopeful words, that we are all part of God's pre planned adoption, by God himself, elected right from the beginning, to live and be united with Christ or 'in Christ', in a relationship with Father God, as his children, into his family.

Wording reminding us of God's spiritual blessings freely bestowed upon us all no matter what culture or difference, or decade. Words reminding us of the importance that Jesus has now broken down those barriers of religious differences and conflict between groups, 'broken down the dividing wall, that is the hostility between (us)' (Ephesians 2:14). There are a lot of plural words used like 'us' and 'we', the beginnings of bringing groups together as one church family.

Beginning with a thanksgiving praise to God for doing so. As we know that thanking God for calling us, calling us into positions that brings challenges to us, that require humility, empathy, patience of us, that risk us having to go against the grain and bravely speak out and up for others, is not easy to do.

Yet we know that we are to strive to do just that and be thankful for it too in faith, as inheritors of God's gifts of grace and forgiveness that he has bestowed upon us, through Jesus Christ. We are called to share this good news so that others may receive them also.

I don't know about you, but I have been more 'why me God' lately, especially this past week in stark contrast to Ephesians language of 'thank you God for calling us to be in this position as your church united by Jesus'. Instead, I have struggled with questions of why I have to bother signing the countless petitions (usually emailed to me) from so many different charities and groups, all with serious issues across all ranges of very real, very raw sufferings of others, who desperately need people to fight their corner, to protest or petition for change.

Why I have to contact my MP about so many things that affect people who are basically faceless, unknown to me personally. Doing so can really be quite depressing because it means not hiding from or avoiding the needs of others, and then really tiring because, as God has taught, through Jesus, we are to follow it up with action. There is so much, that eventually we can also be in danger of it not having any effect on our emotions, detached from it until real life horrors or sufferings may as well just be something fictional that we are watching on TV. The signing of petitions grew after a church Lent group a few years ago, based on the drama 'I Daniel Blake' where we were determined to follow it up with action, doing something about what we had learnt from it.

Some members of our homegroups over the last couple of months have been meeting via Zoom and tackling difficult issues of asylum, immigration, and modern-day slavery. Not easy subjects to choose. During our meetings we have read real life accounts of people in desperate situations that would rely upon the actions of services and people to end their oppression and suffering. We read those biblical accounts that are difficult to enter into, that include murder, sexual violence, and slavery. We are challenged as we are reminded of those who have paved the way to our faith, bringing us connected back to God, even long before John the Baptist did so after them, like Abraham and his descendants, as migrants, relying upon the welcome and acceptance from their new communities, as they escape famine and violence, and then we are reminded of Jesus as migrant.

We know we can't avoid readings like Mark's who tells us like it is, mirroring real life horrors, violence and division that still exist in our world, sandwiched between last week's reading where Jesus sends out his disciples to share the good news and their return and account of how successful their mission was. Just like having to enter into real life bad news or reading real life accounts of suffering, via email or social media, or TV. We know we aren't there yet with unity, peace and forgiveness, or empathy and action.

Mark and Ephesians, both contrasting, both brings us back to the one whose face and story we are to seek always, with all that life brings, through challenges and joys, the face of Jesus. We are to meditate upon God, Son and Holy Spirit in every aspect of life, filling our lives with spiritual food of communion, prayer, faith, fellowship, worship, with thanksgiving to God for it all. Then we can hear our call in deciding whose face we are to really look at and whose story we are to really delve into, and what action we could take. Amen.