

St. Ninian's Parish Church

Sunday 21st June 2020

Matthew 10: 24 - 39 & Romans 6: 1b - 11

It has been a long wait, but it has been worth it. The first volume called *Wolf Hall* was published ten years ago. Even its sequel, *Bring Up the Bodies*, was published before my son was born. Finally, this spring, the 3rd book in Hilary Mantel's trilogy has been published, *The Mirror and the Light*, and I've been reading it.

These novels tell the story of Henry the Eighth's special advisor Thomas Cromwell during the years when Henry was trying to cement his rule by producing a male heir to his throne, and by securing the loyalty of his subjects. If Thomas Cromwell provides character to this story, the drama comes from the tension between Henry and the Pope over who commands the loyalty of English men and women. Do the subjects of England owe their primary allegiance to the Pope or to their sovereign?

When they have to choose, to what should people be loyal, their nation or their faith? That question has never really been resolved. Even today nation states keep a wary eye over religions within their borders. Nearly all nations use legislation to force citizens to hold a superior allegiance to their country than their faith. Some nations even go as far as outlawing religious observance all together, so frightened are they of the competition, and so aware are they of the potential for divided loyalties.

This question of where our loyalties lie, and the possibility of conflict between divided loyalties, is not just something that occurs at a national level. It can appear in the domestic realm too, right in the heart of family life. When we are faithful to what we believe, conflict can ensue with those who do not believe what we believe, or who feel that they are in competition for our affections; second place may not be all that bad, but no one really likes to feel like a runner-up. What commands our loyalty the most, our nation, our family, or our faith?

Nations, religions and families are all institutions that seek to form and support relationships. Nations build relationships between people who would otherwise be strangers, for reasons that include defence, trade, and justice, for example. Families support relationships for the good of children amongst other things. As a religion, Christianity seeks to support people to build new relationships with themselves, other people and God; love the Lord your God, and your neighbour as yourself.

Like families and nations, Christianity not only builds relationships, but the nature of competing loyalties means that it can just as well divide relationships, and so Jesus can say in our reading from the Gospel this morning,

"Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword.

For I have come to set a man against his father,
and a daughter against her mother,
and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law;
and one's foes will be members of one's own household."¹

The parable of the Prodigal Son offers a good example of this. In it, one son leaves home and squanders his inheritance. When he returns with his tail between his legs, he is met by his father running to him with an overflowing, forgiving love - and a party. The father's reaction is an allegory of what God's love is like for us, and what our love should be like for others.

¹ Matthew 10: 34 - 36

But, while affectionate embraces are being exchanged, still a man is being set against his father precisely because of this demonstration of Christian love and forgiveness; the son's older brother complains that although he has stayed on the farm and worked hard no party has ever been thrown for him. "Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword."²

Was this conflict between the father and the older son inevitable once the father had decided to be so generously loving and forgiving towards his younger son? Could the father have lived with himself if he had not welcomed back his younger son in the way that he did?

This week I watched the short series on BBC One called *The Salisbury Poisonings*, which dramatized events in 2018 in the town of Salisbury where a nerve agent was released resulting in the biggest public health emergency in the U.K. before our current pandemic. The film portrays the way that the Director of Public Health for Wiltshire, Tracy Daskiewicz's relationships with her immediate family and closest friends came under strain because to save the lives of the people of Salisbury she had to work 18 – 20 hour long days for the first early weeks of the response.

How could she have lived with herself if she hadn't done her job, even though, she later said, it cost her friendships and put incredible strain on her relationships with her family? To be able to live with herself knowing that she had done her job, she had to take a sword to relationships.

How could Tracy Daskiewicz live with herself if she hadn't been loyal to her calling? How could the father in the Prodigal Son have lived with himself if he hadn't welcomed his son home? After all, as the father in the parable says to the prodigal son's brother, "...this brother of yours was dead and has come back to life..."³

Jesus too, in our Gospel reading this morning, recognises that these questions of split loyalties are often matters of life and death, "Do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul; rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell."⁴ Even within us as individuals there is sometimes a divided loyalty between our body and soul; which do you value more, your life or your soul?

For Jesus, in questions of life and death our physical, material lives take second place to our souls – that is our loving relationships with ourselves, other people and God. When talking to his disciples, Jesus encourages them to prioritise these relationships – the life of their souls - over their material lives, their relationships to their physical bodies.

He does this because, although in the 21st century we believe that our lives, that is our material, physical, bodily lives are the most important things we have, and we will go to remarkable lengths to protect them, nourish them and lengthen them, in fact our physical, material, bodily lives are rarely the most important thing to each of us. When we have to choose, what is almost always more important to us, although we often don't realise it until it is too late, are our souls; our relationships with ourselves, other people - our neighbours so to speak - and God.

Take Thomas More who was Lord Chancellor to Henry Eighth. He was called to choose between his relationship to God and his relationship to his sovereign. He could have saved his bodily life, but he didn't. The life of his soul was more important to him than that, and he became a martyr to his faith.

² Matthew 10: 34

³ Luke 15:32

⁴ Matthew 10: 28

Or take another example. When people's relationships break down, the depths of depression they can fall into can be so great that to them this bodily life is not worth living anymore. But, rarely, if ever, does the opposite happen. No one hears a terminal diagnosis – the end of their relationship with their body - and decide as a consequence to end their relationships with their families and friends. When our relationships end, our bodily lives can seem pointless. But, when our bodily lives come to an end, our relationship become even more important.

When push comes to shove, we often value our social lives, our souls, more than our material lives, our bodies. We value our relationships with our own conscience and with other people more than our relationship with our life. We value our souls over our bodies.

For example, few people, if any, choose being kept alive in a vegetative state with no hope of ongoing relationships with themselves, their neighbours or God, over death.

Recognising what is most valuable to us: our souls or our bodies; our physical health or the health of our reputations; our relationships with ourselves, other people and God or our relationships with our very lives, is important when we want to find our way through life, especially when we are faced with conflicting loyalties. After all, as Jesus said, "...nothing is covered up that will not be uncovered, and nothing secret that will not become known."⁵

Are you ever afraid of being uncovered? Jesus isn't talking about our bodies being uncovered, but about our souls being uncovered. Which would frighten you more?

These past months have been a time of life and death. Every life lost was important, and as a society we have gone to extraordinary lengths to save lives. Of course, we have, how could we live with ourselves if we hadn't – literally? Who would choose to live in a world that turned a blind eye to suffering and death?

Yet, although we are in the midst of life and death, we have hope because we know that even in the face of death there are things that are even more valuable.

"Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet, not one of them will fall to the ground apart from your Father. And even the hairs of your head are all counted. So do not be afraid; you are of more value than many sparrows."⁶

Life is precious, but we are mortal; that's a battle we will lose. But, there are battles we can win that are just as important, sometimes more important. In the midst of a crisis when there are lives at stake, when there is fear and competing demands and loyalties, then, we are called to make sacrifices to save lives so that we can live with ourselves and live in a society that we can be proud of. We are called to offer an extravagant generosity of love in our relationships with our neighbours, families and friends because by so doing we find a life that will sustain us. We are called to be loyal to the holiness of God and his Kingdom, for "Those who find their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it."⁷

Jesus offered us life in all its wholeness, but he offered a sword too, to divide and split so that even in the midst of death, we can still choose life.

⁵ Matthew 10: 24

⁶ Matthew 10: 29 - 31

⁷ Matthew 10: 39