Next before Lent, 8.30am Holy Communion 2022

Those amazing words from today’s Epistle, so familiar from weddings and funerals. But as ever with the Christian faith, the familiarity mustn't be allowed to blunt the edge, instead, it should help the words cut deeper and find a place in our hearts and lives.

So, at weddings especially, I have often begun the sermon by repeating them, but with the names of the happy couple: ‘Alex is patient, Sarah is kind. Alex never holds grudges, Sarah never demands her own way’...

It always gets a laugh, and it helps us to realise that love is not simple sentimentality, or a matter of feelings alone, or only for big occasions like weddings. It is the day-to-day humdrum, glorious mundanity of people doing life together. Putting love into practice, day after day and year after year is the point, not dresses and cakes and champagne.

Today’s Epistle, in all its poetic glory reminds us that the Christian message - the Gospel - carries us through life, holding us, guiding us, because it’s really about the everyday, not just Christmas and Easter, weddings and funerals. The relationship with God into which we invited, the way we are called to live with others as a result, is all about our day to day – how you and I are to actually live. Life with God is both glorious and mundane – in the best possible way.

So to life as it lies before us, another week. But this week is no ordinary week. On Wednesday we begin the Holy Season of Lent. I hope you will come here for one of the several Eucharists with Imposition of Ashes, or a Church near your home or work. It’s
rather old fashioned to speak of Holy Days of Obligation, but that language is not without value. We are obliged to take our lives and our faith seriously – Ash Wednesday is a very important observance for us all.

In today’s Gospel, Jesus tells them what is about to happen; the journey we are about to live as we make our pilgrimage through Lent to Holy Week and Easter: the Lord’s passion, death and resurrection. And, we hear, ‘they understood none of these things’.

How true that is of us too! It takes a blind beggar in today’s Gospel to show us what it really means. The one who can’t see, who has nothing, who has failed at life, (as ever in the Kingdom of God) is the only one who does see, who recognizes the real treasure, and wins the day. And what does he do? He cries out for mercy.

He calls on Jesus in trust and hope, nothing more and nothing less. To be with Jesus and all that we know comes of that is his only intention; he perceives that it is everything, and he goes for it wholeheartedly.

His words have inspired (along with another line from elsewhere in the Gospel) the petition that is known as the Jesus Prayer. It is particularly treasured by our Eastern Orthodox brothers and sisters. Some Orthodox Christians pray it as a mantra almost incessantly throughout the day. It is a wonderful mantra for Christian meditation; I use it every day through my time of silent prayer.

It is simply: ‘Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me a sinner’.

This prayer mantra, inspired by today’s blind beggar contains the whole Gospel and puts it into practice:

-Who Jesus is,
-and the intimacy of our relationship with Him.
-Our need of God’s goodness and life,
-and as we say ‘me’, of course, as a member of the Body of Christ we *always* speak on behalf of the *whole* of the Church, and of all creation, joined as we are by our creatureliness.

As we go into Lent, a Spiritual and ritual wilderness, and as the Covid wilderness rumbles on, as the desert of decency in public life continues, as the wilderness of responsibility and wisdom in leadership stretches to the Ukraine and back, we see, with all our blindness, something that has always been true, and which (like the Apostles) we don’t always ‘get’, building our conditions and demands, our own temples and castles and saviours, our own projects and blabla bla, as we do.

We see the closeness to Jesus that is the only thing that gives healing and brings life. To be a creature in communion with our creator is the only thing that matters and the doorway from which all else leads. Nothing less and nothing more, and it is startling, and radical and real.

And it has to be lived (put into practice, just as the Epistle today says) day by day, moment by moment, year by year. Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me (on us) a sinner.

Lent is the Springtime for the Soul. We are being invited to learn to live again, learn to see again, in these holy days of Lent as we look for Jesus on the path, and seek the life that only He (as the source of all life and love) can give us: ‘Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me a sinner’. 