

Preached at St John's Notting Hill, 23rd October
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When new priests are being ordained and reminded that they will one day have to render account for their stewardship of Christ's people, the Bishop cautions them: "You cannot bear the weight of this calling in your own strength, but only by the grace and power of God." Although regularly directed at those whom God has called to lead his Church, the charge applies just as much to every single Christian called to bring in God's Kingdom of peace and justice on earth. None of us should have the vanity to believe that we can do God's will in our own strength, but only as we open ourselves up to hear his voice and to be inspired and sustained by his power and his Spirit.

All three of our Bible readings today emphasise that it is through faith and trust in God that we shall accomplish our vocation and attain eternal life.

Paul, in prison and facing martyrdom, declares, "I have kept the faith... From now on there is reserved for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord ... will give to me on that day, and ... to all who have longed for his appearing." Paul's lifetime achievements, though colossal in terms of the spread and survival of the Christian Church across the world, ended from a purely human perspective in isolation, humiliation, abandonment and death. Yet he remains confident that the faith he has maintained – and passed on by example and teaching – will bring him safely into the kingdom of God.

In our Old Testament reading, the people of Israel have suffered an overwhelming famine thanks to the plague of locusts which attacked their harvests, but they are promised, through God's mercy, both a time of peace and visionary inspiration and the first signs of the day of the Lord.

The prophet Joel declares to them, "Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved. And Christ's message in our Gospel reading is that "all who humble themselves will be exalted."

In his weekly email, Fr William stressed that humility and obedient faith are – and probably always have been - dramatically counter-cultural.

Throughout the history of the Church, Christians have wrestled with teaching and living out the practice of trusting God in all things, which necessitates a deep level of humility and the diminishing of our own ego. It is only when we "pour ourselves out", as Paul describes it, that we are fully able to rely on the depths of our faith, rather than our own strength, to direct our thoughts and actions.

St Luke has no doubt that Jesus was directing his parable of the Pharisee and the Tax-Collector at "some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt."

The Pharisee believes one hundred per cent, that his salvation is assured by his own virtuous actions in obeying the Jewish law to the letter. He despises and harshly criticises the man who is humble, repentant, conscious of his own failings and aware of God's power and mercy.

Somehow he is incapable of seeing that his unshakable belief in his own goodness and "rightness", and his arrogant dismissal of others: "God, I thank you that I am not like other people", stand in direct contrast to a God of mercy and love.

He is unable to show compassion or understanding, he cannot see that his much-vaunted generosity in giving one-tenth of his income is, in effect, negated by his lack of generosity of spirit towards others.

We stand at the end of a truly extraordinary week in our nation – perhaps the culmination of many weeks, months or even years – and there is more to come.

We also live in fear of the escalation of conflict and are conscious of so many wars across the world – not just in those countries which make the news, but in other, forgotten places, where people wake each day to civil strife, devastation and loss.

In our churches and in our private prayers, we remember these situations, and as instructed by Christ himself, we pray that God's Kingdom of peace and justice may come, and we seek to work for a fairer and safer world. But we have heard today of those who trust in their own strength and treat others with contempt, and as we look around us today, it is only too easy to identify many who fall into this category.

A startling number of those in positions of leadership and authority across today's globe do believe wholeheartedly in their own "righteousness" and reject any need for the humility or compassion which would enable them to listen to the voices of others or of God himself. If we are truly to follow the teachings of Christ, we must speak out against self-absorption and vanity, to say nothing of the contempt and neglect of others, but we must also look into the depths of our own hearts and identify those times when we too rely on our own strength and perceived virtue and forget to place our trust in God.

As the long Trinity season comes to an end, the Sundays before Advent, sometimes known as the "Kingdom Season", continue to remind us of the need for repentance, of God's all-seeing judgment and of the promise of Resurrection with Christ as our eternal hope.

Next week we shall be remembering the countless, nameless saints who have served God in faith and humility without their particular strengths or achievements being known or celebrated. We shall also begin to prepare for the Advent liturgy, which will remind us, "When the Lord comes, he will bring to light the things now hidden in darkness and will disclose the purposes of the heart."

God's light illumines our own self-orientation, our weakness and failures towards others. It also shines light on situations in which an atmosphere of self-congratulation eclipses the needs of others, and reminds us of the need for humble faith and the recognition of God as the source of all power and glory.

The prayer for humility and trust demanded in response to our readings and our world today has been summed up in one core phrase: "Thy Kingdom come, Thy Will be done, on earth as it is in Heaven."

Amen.