

Psalms 119. 41-56.

In our gospel reading and psalm this evening; we hear of people being singled out as different. These people are identifiable because of their faith in God. In our gospel reading, Jesus gives us our most well known prayer, identifies those who fast for public attention, and those who give money with a flourish. In our psalm, the psalmist is singled out for the fervour of his faith:

‘I will speak of your statutes before kings and not be brought to shame’

‘The arrogant mock me unmercifully, but I do not turn from your law’

‘In the night, Lord, I remember your name, that I may keep your law’.

The psalmist verses contribute to the triple repetition of our gospel reminder – ‘And your Father who sees in secret will reward you’.

This is a precept of the living Christian life, that we have to take seriously. If we do not, we are no better than those who fast with long faces. If we do not believe that God knows what we do when we are not around other people – then we are no better than those who put on a public show when going about our deeds in the name of Christ.

None of us are immune to this – least of all we who stand in the pulpit. A study a few years ago once asked congregations which biblical characters they most identified with? Can you guess what clergy were designated? Pharisees and hypocrites.

By happenstance, the vicar has a plaque in her study that always brings this tenet of our faith to my mind – it reads: ‘bidden or not bidden, God is present’.

And so, to avoid being hypocritical, I want to consider what it means to be singled out as a Christian – regardless of distinction.

Firstly, the Christian is Christ’s representative – wherever they are. What we say, and what we do, must reflect the loving nature and expressed will of Jesus. We are, when we pray and discern God’s will for all of us, as Peter reminds us ‘oracles of God’. Our ministry is to improve the lot of others – even the kings in front of whom our psalmist speaks – by being ministers of the Good News, that God the Father, who sees in secret, may be glorified by our actions done out of love for him.

It is notable as we examine scripture too – that this is one of the two things that those giants among early apostles, Peter and Paul, agree on. Indeed for them, it was clear beyond dispute. By seeking, then carrying out Christ’s will in word and deed, can the good of humankind be achieved. Hence, a few centuries later, Thomas Cranmer wrote the collect ‘Almighty God, you have made us for yourself, and our hearts are restless until they find their rest in you’. True joy, happiness, fulfilment come to all of us through sharing in the peace of God – because the church, for all its arguments and disagreement, is precisely that. It is a group of people who come together to listen, to talk, to discuss how best they serve God in this world. It is a group of people that discusses their responses to the arrogant, perhaps punctures our own at times, and faces the hard questions that others struggle with in life – convinced that the wounded body of the risen Christ, the image of the invisible God, has something transformative to offer.

I have an incredible amount of admiration for you who live your Christian lives bereft of a collar – you have to do the work at the coalface. You are the people in the world – and have to take more seriously the beliefs, practices and concerns of others. You are the people who manage to become, by virtue of your myriad places, ‘all things to all people’. You have to, to remain true to the faith you

have in Christ. The apostle Paul again utilises the mass medium of the day – the pagan altars – to promote his Christian message by proclaiming his message taken from the altar's inscription 'to the unknown gods'. By doing so, he utilises his ear for the language, the culture, the thoughts and aspirations to present the truths that he believes about God in his heart.

To be rewarded by our father in heaven, who sees in secret, is one of our hardest tasks as Christians. In our baptism we promise to reject evil in all its forms – like the psalmist to speak before kings. We promise to turn to Christ – so that in the darkness of night we may remember the name of our loving God. We put our trust in Christ, and promise to follow him for ever. You and I as Christians have all promised this – and it is the basis of all our ministry – whatever that looks like.

And so we undertake our ministry to show our love to the Father, who sees what we do in the silence of our hearts, to show our belief, our love, and our integrity to all of his creation. We are all ministers in the world, aware that it might be costly at times, but willing – at least in baptism and at confirmation – to shoulder that responsibility before those who are arrogant, or lordly, and without falling into hypocritical fanfare before our every action. As we live in the world, so do discern what our ministry looks like in each of our own lives – to strike a responsive chord in the hearts of others to God, rather than resulting in indifference, hostility, or incomprehension. We are assured in our readings that there are always those who will notice and comment, not least our Lord. And so we seek, as his body, to give them something good to comment on – and build each other up for all our varied ministries. Amen.