

Invitation to a Spectacular Ordinary Life

Some years ago, Michael and I spent 11 days in North Korea – the hermit state. Every move we made was monitored and observed by members of the secret police. To be fair, they were very obvious about it – there was nothing secret. We met our guide in Beijing, and in the course of the pre-holiday briefing meeting, I asked permission to take a Bible into North Korea. Permission was sought and granted, as long as I promised to take it home with me, and under no circumstances leave it in the country. My carrying a Bible with me was written down on my entry form and checked as I left the country. Leaving the country was more challenging than arriving - we flew in, and had a 26 hour train journey out. In the course of that journey our cameras were checked by secret police to ensure we hadn't captured anything that would 'disrespect' the ruling family. To do so would place not only us, but our British guide and our secret police escorts in very real danger. My book list was checked and my bible duly noted.

So, imagine my surprise when we were on a train, the couple of hours from the relative freedom of China to hear some North American teenagers singing praise songs and watching them throwing Christian tracts out of the train window. Their approach to risk and the challenges of being in a hostile environment were profoundly different to mine.

In our Gospel reading today, Jesus invites us to stand up for him, to speak out for him, at some considerable cost. Before we examine what that means for us individually and as a community – can we pause for a moment and reflect on the wonder that is the King of Heaven inviting us to stand up for Him, to be his voice, his hands, his feet, to be His Ministry in this place. Jesus, our Lord, our Prince of Peace, invites us into his work – and promises that if we stand up for Him, he will stand up for us in the Throne Room of Heaven. Imagine, just imagine Jesus standing beside you as you bow low before God, and hearing His voice saying your name and following it with the words – she is one of mine or he is one of mine. When the story of your life is played on the Heavenly video screens, all of your life, the parts you are proud of and those bits that make you squirm, are there for all to see, Jesus says again... I know, I know it all, and I love you still, you are mine.

And so, here, in this reading we have Jesus inviting us to stand for Him – not to be passengers on a fairground carousel, enjoying an ephemeral ride of lifetime back to where we started, but to live as if our faith, and His sacrifice really does matter, really is the most important thing in our lives. And let's be clear, as Jesus was clear – this isn't an easy ride. It's not one for the faint-hearted or lukewarm. It's an ongoing commitment to Christ, despite the cost. Costs that may be high, costs that may make us gasp or cry out in fear, in pain, in anger. In this passage Jesus is asking us what our faith really means – and it comes with an injunction to forget about ourselves and more than one promise of God's unending love and commitment to you, to me, to us.

It's a similar theme in our passage from Romans today – because of Christ's death, we can leave all our sin behind – and live in a new way, and life giving, Christ-like way. The Message puts it like this: "Sin speaks a new language that means nothing to you; God speaks your mother tongue, and you hang on every word. You are dead to sin and alive to God....wholeheartedly and full-time.

Where does that take us? We are alive to God and Jesus is inviting us to participate in his work. Wow. That seems to me to be a huge privilege, a bit reckless and not a little daunting. How do we

do that? I think my friend, the Rev Dr Viv Thomas might be able to help us, through his book the Spectacular Ordinary Life. In this short book, Viv suggests some very practical pointers on how we are to live in answer to Jesus' great invitation. His central idea is that, given we have all been made in the image of God – our lives can be both spectacular and ordinary - we don't all have to be famous or fabulous, we are already known and loved by God. But, to live that life to the full, three things need to be in concert in our lives:

“communion with God, community with others and a mission to the world’.

To live out the invitation we are offered, we have to have God at the centre – communion with Him, through His word, through prayer and through the Eucharist are prerequisites. Second, we are formed in community - in our homes, our families our churches our schools our work and our rest. Living a spectacular ordinary life is not done in isolation. Thirdly we have a mission to the world – Jesus calls us today's gospel to work for him to speak up for Him. We are here not for ourselves but for others.

Let me finish with a couple of thoughts on how we might do that, here, in our community in our mission field.

1. We have to be here – to worship, to adore to learn, listen and share – this is God's work that we do at His invitation. He has to be at the centre.
2. We have to be participants in our community – which is why I'm so excited about the Foyer Groups starting in September, the choir Evensong Tour, the community fridge, the great choir car wash, and so much more....
3. We have to find the thing or things that only we can do, only we can offer, and do them. Don't misunderstand me, I'm not calling us all out into activism - or endless hours of service. But what I am inviting us all to do is to think about what we can do, and do that. Is it that as things slow down for the summer you have more time to pray for the mission of this church, the people of North Korea, or the people you love or the situation in Ukraine. Is it that you have been meaning to have a conversation with someone for ages about your faith but you haven't quite yet? Is that you have a calling within you that you've been trying to ignore. Whatever it is – I think this passage invites us to bring it out into the open, and test it within the community – and see what happens. Because that's when the spectacular comes into the ordinary.

Whether you are singing praise songs on the train from North Korea to China, asking permission to take a Bible in and out of the country or participating in any of the thousands of activities that it takes to make this community run week in or week out – you are standing up for Jesus – just as He asked. The invitation into a spectacular ordinary life is open to us all, every moment of every day. It's costly, and it's what we were made for. A spectacular ordinary life. Are you in?