

Trinity 12: St Thomas-on-The Bourne, Farnham, September 8th 2019

Now large crowds were travelling with him; and he turned and said to them, 26 'Whoever comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and even life itself, cannot be my disciple. 27 Whoever does not carry the cross and follow me cannot be my disciple Luke 14, 25

Politically, you and I have been through a terrible week. It's been bruising, volatile and deeply troubling: the political institutions that we have relied on for much of our lives have been shaken to their very foundations. The underlying values of a civilised society about truth-telling and fairness and loyalty have been treated with brutal and raffish insouciance. And we seem not to be coming out of the turmoil any time soon. Living with such profound uncertainty is exhausting for us all.

But, let's keep things in perspective: our Queen has remained as faithful and as dedicated to her task as ever; hospitals have continued to run; the dustbins have been collected; justice has been exercised; the armed services and the emergency services have continued to do their jobs. People have got on to the trains and travelled to and from work. For many of us, the ordinary duties of life have continued to be met. Society has not collapsed, even if Parliament has been in a frenzied and hysterical state. And we haven't had a revolution...

Seen in a much longer perspective we might want to consider the periods of uncertainty faced by a 16th century Bishop of Winchester; a man called Stephen Gardiner. He was a priest, an expert in civil and canon law, and was one of Henry VIII's Ambassadors. He went on difficult negotiating trips to the European powers on a number of occasions. (So, nothing changes). He did not have huge success, but he was trusted, (most of the time) by the King. But when Henry VIII died Stephen Gardiner found himself ostracised by the front rank of advisers to the new boy-king, Edward VI. In fact, he disagreed with the Regency Council over a theological issue. They were Reformers; he, by nature and belief, was a conservative. And the two sides fell out. As a result, he was imprisoned without trial in the Fleet. One minute he was at the centre of power, the next he was in a dungeon. It was the 16th century version of losing the Whip.

Eventually he was released and placed under house-arrest and in February 1548 received permission to return to Winchester. *En route*, he stayed in Farnham and whilst here he preached a sermon at St Andrew's. He preached about the importance of obeying those in authority. There was nothing contentious in what he said. But when he arrived in Winchester he was accused of being less than obedient to the King and his Council. He was summoned back to London where he was required to preach a kind of test-sermon in front of the Regency Council. He obeyed. He thought it had gone well and so that evening he had a celebratory supper with some friends believing that he had escaped the censure of the Council. Suddenly the doors burst open, soldiers rushed in and he was taken to the Tower where he was locked up for a further five years. After that time of virtually solitary confinement he was eventually brought to trial and many witnesses were called from Farnham to recall what Gardiner had said in his Farnham sermon. It makes fascinating reading. And to put you out of your misery when Queen Mary came to the throne, he was released from prison and became one of her chief advisers. That was living with uncertainty 16th century style.

As I have said, we also are living in times of political uncertainty.

Now take this from the national level to the personal....Our phone rang on Friday morning. It was a Vicar from Hertfordshire telling us that one of our close colleagues and friends had suddenly died. He had been the legal Registrar for St Albans diocese, a man of great and lovely integrity and wisdom. A man much loved in the parish to which he had retired. He had been a little unwell over the past few weeks, but nothing serious; he went upstairs, seemed to be gone a long time. His wife went up to see if he was OK and found him dead in the bathroom: a terrible shock for her and for their family.

I have little doubt that many of you here could tell of similar personal sadnesses which have afflicted you this week, entirely unexpectedly and entirely unforeseen.

The fact is, life is uncertain...

What can our faith offer in a world which is uncertain, and in which our personal lives are also uncertain...?

When Jesus proclaimed that harsh sentence we heard in our Gospel reading a few minutes ago, about hating mothers and fathers and children, it was a hyperbolic way of expressing a truth...that in a desperately uncertain world, the only certainty is that God is. He is the one to whom we owe allegiance. Why? Because when all around us is uncertain, God is the One who journeys with us through uncertainty. When we feel we are in complete darkness, there the light of God is; when we are in the depths of despair, there we discover hope from God; when the waters of chaos threaten to overwhelm us, there God is, a rock, a fortress.

We are so blessed to have this gift of faith, no matter how much it may sometimes feel battered and fragile; and our other gift is this, we have each other; you and I are able by God's grace to be in solidarity one with another through all that happens, and that is in itself the loveliest of good news...

'All my hope on God is founded, he doth still my trust renew...'

The Rt Revd Dr Christopher Herbert.