

LET US PRAY - may the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be acceptable in your sight, our Lord and our Redeemer. Amen

## ROCKY RELATIONSHIPS

EDUCATION, EDUCATION, EDUCATION. You may remember Tony Blair in 1997 saying this in one of his speeches, as he set out the top three priorities for the labour party in the forthcoming election and so indicating the importance they attached to Education. Well, I feel as though each time I have found myself recently, leading worship, the theme comes round to :

COMMUNICATION, COMMUNICATION, COMMUNICATION. I remember a member of the church of my youth - he was a headmaster, ran the church football team and played cricket for the local village team and for many years was the Sunday school leader. Whenever he occasionally led the service or spoke at the Sunday school anniversary, invariably his theme was the parable of the talents. In his case - talents being the skills and abilities that each of us possess. It was Predictable. So I hope I am not going to become so predictable - but when you think about it, the foundation of the Bible and of our faith is all founded on God's communication with his people, either directly or indirectly. Through words and actions described in the Old Testament or through coming to earth in the person of Jesus Christ and again using words and actions to communicate his desire for his people, and indicating to them how they should behave towards God and to each other. But of course, communication is both ways, and so we have plenty of examples of ways in which certain individuals respond to God's communication - in praise and thanksgiving, in exhortation to others to obey God (as in the Psalm for today), complaints, lamentation and moaning, disagreement, anger, argument, and refusal to do what God has asked.

In the readings allocated for today, we see examples of a number of these different styles. In Genesis we read of God speaking to Abraham and Sarah. God makes a covenant or a promise that Abraham and Sarah, will have a son who will become the ancestor of all the subsequent tribes of Israel. In response, Abraham laughs and says you must be joking, a son, at my age ? but nevertheless he accepts what is said and it come to pass. In Psalm 22, the psalmist (David) starts off with a complaint and lament by asking why God has forsaken him, but then continues with an acknowledgement that God has done great things, followed by an exhortation for everyone to give praise and thanksgiving to God and to bow down and worship him.

In the extract from Paul's letter to the Romans, we see Paul explaining that just as Abraham trusted and believed in God by faith, so we too can have faith in the resurrection of Jesus and so become righteous - that is, "right with God".

In the gospel reading from Mark, we have two particular instances of Jesus' communication with his disciples. The first concerns him delivering bad news and the second relates to what his disciples

must do if they wish to follow him. Thinking first of the bad news. Jesus tells his disciples that he has to die but will then be resurrected. Peter, goes berserk and in his anger and anxiety and fear tells Jesus not to talk like that. At that stage, the concept of resurrection wouldn't have meant anything to him and was not therefore much of a counter to the idea that Jesus was going to die and so the disciples were going to lose him. Quite naturally they would be upset, hence Peter's reaction. Jesus then harangues Peter and calls him Satan. Sounds like a schoolboy spat ! This is where the theme of this morning's service comes from - Rocky Relationships. Although this situation between Jesus and Peter is pretty serious, they are able to overcome it, and as we know, Jesus later calls Peter The Rock on which the church will be built. Even though Peter then goes on to deny knowing Jesus at the time of Jesu's arrest and subsequent crucifixion, Jesus sees something in Peter that gives him confidence that Peter has something in his character that will repay Jesus' faith in him.

Secondly, Jesus says the three things they, AND WE, are to do: deny themselves, take up their cross and follow him. For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me and for the gospel will save it. I think what Jesus is saying here is, denying ourselves is not about going without things, going without pleasure etc.(as we tend to associate with Lent) but rather it is about putting ourselves at the disposal of God and being prepared to do / risk what we think God is asking of us - however unlikely, difficult, humbling or humiliating it might be, rather than putting our own desires first. Taking up our cross can then be seen as actually taking on the tasks we believe God is asking of us. It may involve personal suffering or struggle but it may be a delight - in Mathew Jesus says for my Yolk is easy and my burden is light. With the help of the Holy Spirit we are supported in carrying our cross - in doing God's bidding. And by doing this, and taking God's task on we are following Jesus. We are being his disciples. The trick is knowing what it is that God wants of us. From our first hymn - what is that God is saying to us. This is not always / generally easy to be sure of, but the more we pray, the more we try and communicate with God and allow him to communicate with us and the more we try to move our own needs and desires to one side and try to follow his call, the more readily we will become aware of what we are being asked to do. In doing this, we may lose our earthly life - either physically (not likely in God's service in the safety of the UK) or metaphorically (by putting the needs of others before ourselves) but will gain everlasting life in Christ.

But what if, we get angry or resentful, or worried or fearful and remonstrate with God , like Peter or Jeremiah? or refuse like Jonah ? or laugh like Abraham ? Don't worry, all is not lost. God still sees in us that which led him to ask to do the task in the first place and will put our rocky relationship right - it may take a few stern words, and we will need to acknowledge our part in making things rocky, but his faith in us never wavers. Let our faith in him be steadfast.

So let us this week, deny ourselves, take up our cross and follow him. For Jesus's sake and in service to God and our community. Amen