

St Peter's, Ealing
Sunday 18th August 2019
Trinity 9 YrC

Why do you not know how to interpret the present time?

I have just finished reading Richard Rohr's latest book The Universal Christ. A good readable piece of theology looking at the nature of Christ and Christ's place in the story of salvation. It is a companion book to his book The Divine Dance. If you have not read either I suggest (as does Richard Rohr) you read The Divine Dance first, then The Universal Christ, a tip I discovered about three chapters in. Not a discovery that detracted from the book but something to be noted.

For those of you who do not know Richard Rohr, he is a Franciscan brother who runs The Centre for Action and Contemplation in Albuquerque, New Mexico. He has an internet and email based ministry of teaching, running courses both at his centre and online. He has been described as a modern mystic, delving into the ancient writings of the early church to discover new or rediscovering old ways of expressing faith in the twenty-first century, with the aim of renewing our understanding of scripture and our personal journey of faith.

One of the conclusion of his present book is that Western thought has become trapped in a binary way of thinking. That everything must be black or white, right or wrong. Through Christ, Richard argues, we are shown a different way of seeing the world where there isn't right or wrong but being, renewing, death and resurrection.

In this approach death is that through which we give up or relinquish the unnecessary or extraneous, and through which we are given new challenges and renewal in our relationship with God. Rohr suggests the process, if indeed it is a process is organic. We engage with the world and in that engagement we are challenged and something in the challenge is lost in us, or in other words dies, leaving space and time for renewal and growth into a new existence, or resurrection.

As Jesus says in today's gospel 'I came to bring fire'. In Rohr's view this becomes a statement reflecting this new spiritual journey where, in faith in Jesus we are challenged to new insights and views of the world that change our existing understanding. It is through this change we are encouraged to grow in faith and love of God as well as to grow as individuals.

In today's passage from the writer to the Hebrews there is an underlining of how this has happened in the lives of the great saints and patriarchs of the Old Testament. Barak, Daniel, Samuel and Samson all underwent times of trial. The writer reminds us of the tortuous journeys of faith many took that lead to imprisonment, mocking and chains. In this changed state they could not help but follow the way of Jesus and come closer to God in their renewed faith that carried them on that journey.

In our passage from Jeremiah, through his prophet, God is calling to his people for renewal, for change in their relationship to and understanding of God. Those not renewed in his love are falsely prophesying in God's name. The challenge here is to speak the truth of God in the face of a world that did not want to hear it. God declares "let the one who has my word speak my word faithfully."

How then do we speak the word faithfully in a world that seeks proofs and evidence and clarity; in a world of binary thinking and which only sees value in straight answers; in empirical data and proven facts? We begin by taking a closer walk with God. By consciously deciding this is the path we want to take, fully aware it will be one full of challenges, in Jesus' words 'fire'. We soon realise this isn't a route understood by the world. We come to realise this is a journey like no other in which God becomes the compass as well as the motivation. It is one where when our hearts and minds are open to God, we begin to see the world in a different light, one that is no longer dark but full of colour and joy. In Jeremiah's prophecy God says, 'do I not fill the heaven and earth?' The people of Israel had been trying to confine God through false prophecy which is a lack of understanding of God and God's place in and through the world. God's challenge was for us to see God in all things, to see God throughout creation, to be renewed in our understanding of life that is centred on God not on the world. This is a fearful place to be, that's why Jeremiah's prophecy says God's word is like fire, like a hammer that breaks rocks in pieces.

The faith life is not easy; no one can truly claim it is. To live in faith is possible if we trust in God. In the passage from Hebrews the writer says; 'let us lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith.' To do this we should be honest with those around us. In our place of work, in our family, amongst our friends; honest that we follow Jesus. As we run this race, we are challenged with that fire Jesus brought to the earth, we die and yet through that death we live to God in Christ Jesus. Live then this life of faith Jesus offers us, run the race, face the challenges, die and be renewed daily, grow in faith and love and we can be honest in our faith and our life that Jesus loves us and loves the world.