

Sermon for Trinity 10 Sunday 31st July 2016
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On the 29th December 1170 at the service of Vespers at Canterbury Cathedral Archbishop Thomas a Becket was murdered as he prayed. On Tuesday 26th July 2016 while celebrating Mass at his church in Saint-Etienne-du-Rouvray, Fr Jacques Hamel was murdered as he prayed. To these names we might add Oscar Romero's, Archbishop of San Salvador, champion of justice for the poor, who in 1980 was also murdered at his altar. These actions are abominations and they cry out to heaven.

In another terrible week it is hard to know where to turn from such outrages against all that is good, decent, human in fact. Even the most placid and robust of us I think recognise that these days are strange days indeed. If we allow ourselves too much minute by minute media coverage of such events we can find ourselves beyond anger, even beyond fear, in the thrall of a kind of dark inertia – helplessness. Hopelessness. The greatest danger of all.

Our readings today chime all too presciently with the week that they follow. Our first reading from the Book of Ecclesiastes is cold comfort at first, and even second glance. The writer – the Preacher – is traditionally thought to be King Solomon. He has had all that wealth and wisdom and worldly honour can show but has found it empty. Vanity of vanities, all is vanity...life is an unhappy business...he gives up in despair ...for our lives are full of pain and even at night our minds do not rest. Oh dear.

Our Psalm, our New Testament and our Gospel all have echoes of the Preacher, but they expand from his statements of human misery and vanity – hopelessness- to look at the meaning of his message. The message that this earthly life is full of care and things in themselves do not satisfy us.

In Luke's Gospel Jesus tells a parable to help his listeners – and you and me- to reflect on these things. People's concerns and preoccupations have not really changed very much over the years. Jesus is asked in this passage to intervene in family money matters: "Tell my brother to divide the inheritance with me." Later in his Gospel, Luke records Jesus telling the parable of the Prodigal Son - another inheritance question. Earthly things were just as much on everyone's lips as the value of our West London houses is for us. But this parable is a harsher warning than the one the Prodigal receives. Jesus says: "Take care be on your guard ...for one's life does not consist in the abundance of possessions" The story he tells is of a wealthy man who literally sets store by his great wealth. He builds bigger barns to contain it all. This is not a mistake in itself – prudence is a virtue not a sin – his mistake is to look at all his great possessions and think that they can insulate him from the reality of life. Life's fragility and the inevitability of death.

Jesus' message is not about neglecting our day to day responsibilities or rejecting simple pleasures, but about not pinning all our hopes on them. Honour the here and now with due diligence but do not anchor your life on them. For they cannot hold us.

And this is helpful today. For if we are not to pin our hopes on worldly success and plenty, then neither must we be rendered hopeless by the world's darkness and pain.

We must naturally be appalled by the violence and evil in this world but do not let it crush Christ's loving spirit within us. The love that does not shrink from darkness but overcame it and overcomes it now.

We know quite a lot about Thomas a Becket and Oscar Romero. The stands that they made against the authorities and powers of their time made them vulnerable to those who hated what they stood for. We know very little as yet of Fr Jacques Hamel. He was vulnerable as we are all vulnerable by living out his Christian ministry. (Trying hard not to look fearfully at who might enter through our west door today.) But there is one thing we can know that these three men shared. That we share. They knew with St Paul that we have here no abiding city.

St Paul, we believe, died at the hands of those opposed to his message in Rome. That mighty city whose end in those days who might have guessed? But that great city did fall. The kingdom of God will never fall.

From the very beginning of the Christian story men and women of faith have been forced to choose between living in fear and living and dying for love; be it 1st century Rome, 12th century England or 21st century France. And in all those places further away from us perhaps, where Christians have been persecuted for generations.

St Paul does not shrink from the fact that such living is costly. That it is seen by many as "folly" to live such self-giving, vulnerable lives as the Christian Gospel demands. But he concludes that it is not in our own strength that we follow such a path. He writes: The love of Christ urges us on because we are convinced that one has died for all...so that those who live might live no longer for themselves, but for him who died and was raised for them.

The love of Christ urges us on. And this is indeed a costly love. And it asks us to look closely at all the things that cry to heaven and this can be the most difficult of all. We look with horror at Fr Hamel's terrible death but we must also look at the deaths of the two nineteen year old boys who caused it. Lives cut short by violence and hatred. Christ's love has no bounds and the love of Christ urges us on today.

Each of us will have our own times places of fear, of hopelessness, or inertia in the face of what we see and hear. Let us encourage and urge one another in Christ's name to pray, to hope, to care, to listen and to love.

Amen