

## **Celebrating the Social Reformers**

(Sermon preached at St.Mary,s Choral Evensong for All Saints Day)

Readings: Isaiah 65:17-25 and Hebrews 11:32 - 12:2

"Blood, Guts and Fire" is the title of a podcast I've been enjoying lately. As we celebrate the festival of All Saints, you might be wondering if it has anything to do with the lives of the martyrs. In fact, it's about the book of Leviticus. Yes, Leviticus, that Old Testament book of rules and regulations we might prefer to bypass.

The speaker, Rob Bell, somehow manages to unpack the the most obscure scriptures for a 21st Century audience and is determined to dig out good news. One of the key treasures he unearths in the book of Leviticus is freedom.

He imagines God speaking to the Israelites in the wilderness and saying this:

"I didn't bring you out of Egypt just so that you could be out of Egypt. I liberated you so that you can show the world what liberation looks like."

The Exodus is a foreshadowing of the cross on which Jesus freed us from the slavery of sin. And now his Spirit shapes us into a new kind of people who can bring his grace, liberation and healing to the rest of the world.

Rob Bell invites us to delve deep with important questions. He asks:

"Are you the sum total of your story? Is your joy, healing, freedom, vitality, blessing, abundance, money, talent, passion, desire - is it only about you - or as a human being are you here to be a channel through which the divine flows to the world around you?"

He sounds as if he talking about those people down through the ages whom we call saints. Those exemplary Christians whose freedom in Christ has motivated them to free others from terrible situations - from persecution, poverty, slavery, squalor, debt or lack of education.

It is a beautiful development that, since The Alternative Service Book in 1980 and Common Worship in 2000, the Church of England has been extending its catalogue of saints from Biblical and early church heroes to incorporate a whole spectrum of exemplary Christians up through the 20th Century. They are remembered on specially designated days known as lesser festivals and commemorations.

There are teachers of the faith, translators of scripture, hermits, nurses, evangelists, missionaries, mystics, martyrs and social reformers.

Perhaps you know that the Church of England has Five Marks of Mission? They are statements that describe different aspects of Christian service. The fourth Mark of Mission is this:

To transform unjust structures in society, to challenge violence of every kind and pursue peace and reconciliation.

It is a joy to see included in our current calendar of saints a whole range of people who did just that: social reformers : people with passion and commitment to undo injustices of various kinds.

William Wilberforce who campaigned for the abolition of slavery,

Josephine Butler who spoke up for and improved the lives of prostitutes,

Elizabeth Fry who fought for better prison conditions for women and children,

Florence Nightingale who raised the status of nursing to a professional level and

Octavia Hill whose efforts led to better housing conditions for the poor in Victorian London.

Archbishop William Temple, who set out his vision for a post-war society that would reflect the innate dignity of each person created in the image of God. He proposed a Welfare State with universal access to healthcare, education, decent housing, proper working conditions, and democratic representation. And this was taken up by

Beveridge and turned into a reality, becoming what we now know as the NHS. William Temple's commemoration falls this coming Tuesday.

And last but not least there is our local saint, George Muller, whose work transformed the lives and education of over 10.000 Bristol orphans, all flowing out of a life of faith and prayer.

These saints I just mentioned by name have two important things in common:

Firstly, they understood that there is no such thing as cheap grace. Being a disciple of Jesus Christ is costly. Their love was sacrificial and they carried on their work to its completion. They ran with perseverance the race set before them.

Secondly, they were missionaries of hope. They lived like the kingdom was near. They dared to anticipate that new heaven and earth described in that beautiful passage we heard from Isaiah:

"That place where no child shall ever again die an infant, no old man fail to live out his life; every boy shall live his hundred years before he dies, where whoever falls short of a hundred shall be despised. Where men and women shall build houses and live to inhabit them, plant vineyards and eat their fruit; Where God's people shall live the long life of a tree, and God's chosen shall enjoy the fruit of their labour. Where his people shall not toil in vain or raise children for misfortune."

The social reformers are part of that continuing great cloud of witnesses described by the writer of the Hebrews: The root of the word witness actually means martyr. Faith leads to action and action is risky.

But remember! Saints don't just live in history books! In his letters to the early churches Paul routinely addresses the believers as saints. Let us remember that we are part of that continuum called the Communion of Saints, connected across time and space.

All around the world this very minute there are Christians beavering away in response to their faith - alleviating poverty, lifting people out of debt or running foodbanks. There are people committed to

undoing the evils of fixed odds betting terminals or helping people climb out of addiction and alcoholism and those working to overturn unjust imprisonment and death sentences, such as in the case of Asia Bibi.

And there are people among us right here at All Saints and St.Mary's Fishponds who are working seen and unseen, sung and unsung, to transform the lives of the people around them for the better.

So back to Rob Bell's questions.

Am I the sum total of my story? No.

Is my joy, healing, freedom, vitality, blessing, abundance, money, talent, passion, desire - is it only about me - or as a human being am I here to be a channel through which the divine flows to the world around me?" Yes.

Let's ask for God's help in this saintly calling.

*God of Justice, God of Mercy, give us the perseverance to run the race you set before us. Show us the path that leads to the very people in whose lives you know we can make a difference. For the sake of Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of our faith. Amen.*