

Sermon for Sunday 7th March 2021

John 2:13-22

1 Corinthians 1:18-25

The power of lies.

My wife Janine and I watched a film that we had recorded recently. It was the Boy in the Striped Pyjamas and was based upon a book by John Boyne. The main character is a German 8-year-old boy whose father is a high-ranking SS officer. The father is posted to take command of a concentration camp, and the film deals with how the family, the father, mother, boy and his elder sister, deal with what is happening inside the camp. It is a study of how a well-educated upper middle-class family who are practising Christians try to deal with the implementation of their government's genocidal policy. It shows the pressure that duty, the law and social expectations can place on individuals, how they bend to conform and how the innocence of a child, the young boy, cuts through the struggles and hypocrisy of his elders.

The film left me wondering how I would have dealt with such a situation. Would I conform with what I am ordered to do even though it would be contrary to my personal beliefs? You could argue that with our modern communications and news sources, the situation would not arise. The concentration camps could not be hidden from the majority of the population as they were in the 1940's could they? We would all know the truth and so would not allow such state wrongdoing to exist.

But would it be like this? Look at what has recently happened in the USA. President Trump cannot bear to think about not being re-elected, so he mounts a campaign that started before the election of alleging that his opponents will conspire to defraud him and 'steal' the election. He does lose, but his allegations of fraud and wrongdoing in the election continue. There is no evidence of this conspiracy against him. Every investigation and court case concludes that the election was fair. Yet millions of Americans believe Trump. His political party support him or refuse to condemn him for his wrong allegations. Trump seems to believe that if you tell a lie long enough, often enough and loud enough people will believe you. The Nazis did the same, and so do totalitarian regimes across the world today. Surely the age of social media where nothing seems to be hidden will stop something like the Nazi allegations of Jewish conspiracies to topple the German Christian state? Close run in the USA wasn't it? Struggling to work in China and Myanmar.

The unbelievable Jesus

Our New Testament readings today have something to say about when we behave in situations where the state, where officialdom, is doing something which clashes with what we know and believe is right. In our gospel reading, Jesus finds things are wrong in the Temple. All the gospels include a record of how Jesus reacted when he saw how the Temple was being used. John includes the incident at the beginning of his gospel, whilst the other 3 gospels place this happening after Jesus has entered Jerusalem for the last time, where he is going to reach the climax of his time on earth, at his crucifixion. The likelihood is that the writer of the gospel of John is describing the same incident as the other gospel writers.

The law required sacrifices and offerings to be made at important and memorable events in Jewish life. If you remember, it is not many weeks since we celebrated the presentation of Jesus at the Temple by Joseph as required when a child is born. Under the law specific animals needed to be sacrificed for the various visits to give thanks to God or to seek his help. A system of supplying these animals had grown up at the Temple. If a money offering was required, then it should be paid in a special 'Temple' currency, and a system of supply of these special coins had also grown up. It made things more convenient for worshippers to obtain their sacrifices when they needed them, but it had also developed in a way that made a healthy profit for the Temple authorities.

Jesus is challenged by the Temple hierarchy. I can quite understand why they wanted to know just who did Jesus think he was to attack the way that they ran the Temple. Jesus comes out with a claim that if the Temple was destroyed, he would rebuild it in 3 days. An outstanding and unbelievable claim. The gospel writer with hindsight can explain what he meant, but the listeners to this claim did not have this hindsight.

Are we spreading Trumpisms?

Jesus regularly makes these kinds of statements where his listeners just cannot comprehend what he is referring to. Think of the number of times that Peter, the spokesperson for the disciples, does not get what he has seen or heard. We can do the same when we talk about our faith. In many ways we are spreading a way of looking at life which is intuitively based upon what appears to be in Donald Trump's words 'fake news'. What is one of the basic beliefs of our faith. That a man dies, is dead for 3 days and then comes back to life? How reasonable does saying something like this sound? We are like Jesus and making a statement which is outside the experience and understanding of some of our listeners. It requires accepting just who Jesus was, and is, to understand what happens in the Easter story. Without that acceptance of the fact that Jesus is the Son of God, then acceptance of the Resurrection will never take place.

Paul in our epistle addresses this situation. Paul tells us that those with worldly wisdom will find the message of the crucifixion unbelievable, but those who do accept who Jesus is will be saved by this message. He describes the message that we preach as being foolishness. Being dead is being dead. The more knowledge and understanding that is gained about how bodies work, the more that is attempted to repair and heal our bodies. We can now 'clone' organs, use our knowledge to rebuild organs and create replacement parts for transplanting. Creating new life or bringing the dead back to life still is not possible.

When we preach the gospel of Jesus, we will come across to some people in the same way that Donald Trump comes across when he is proclaiming his false claims. The difference is that what we are claiming is not false, but true. The wisdom and actions of God are unworldly and cannot be judged or understood in worldly terms. The power of God is such that Jesus his Son can bring people back to life. No organ cloning or transplants with Jesus, but just a touch. No matter how clever, wise or knowledgeable someone is, they will never understand the message of the cross if they do not accept Jesus as being the Son of God.

This what Paul is saying, and without God opening the minds of our listeners, in the words of Paul 'those who are called,' the Gospel we speak to people will be taken in the way that I look at Trumpisms. Lots of noise, lots of passion but not to be believed – everything is based on falsehoods. Pray that God opens minds to hear the Gospel of Jesus and accept the truth.