

Reflection for June 21st based on the readings Jeremiah 20:7-13 and Matthew 10:24-31

“Virtual discipleship”

Whilst out walking recently I noticed a leaflet tied to a lamp-post advertising Slimming World's classes at a nearby Church hall. Details of when the sessions took place and how to contact the leader were present, but then across all those details was another piece of paper which read “Now virtual” indicating, of course, that everything was now online, rather than in person.

Having the sort of mind that wanders a bit, I wondered for a moment or two about the concept of virtual slimming, and how much easier it might be if we only had to watch our weight, or exercise more in a virtual, rather than real, world.

In our Old Testament reading, Jeremiah is having a bad day in his all too real world! In fact he is having a pretty bad time all round. Having reluctantly received his calling to be a prophet, he goes on to proclaim the word of God in which the people are called to return to God if they are to avoid invasion. The people and their leaders reject his word, and just before our reading, Jeremiah is beaten and placed in the stocks for his troubles.

Jeremiah then offers a lament, a complaint, or a psalm in which he appears to be stuck between obedience to God and the resultant indifference or outright antagonism of the people. He has been faithful to God's calling, but his words are ridiculed or ignored, God seems to do nothing to help him or convince the people of the validity of Jeremiah's message, and sometimes Jeremiah even wonders if the word given to him is the wrong message, that he has been deceived.

The easy way out of this, of course, would be for Jeremiah simply to remain quiet! But we hear that the word that has come to him is like a fire in his heart. “I am weary of holding it in; indeed, I cannot.” he says - such is the sense of compulsion to respond to God's message within him. That feeling that he cannot stop even if when his very existence, and most certainly, his reputation and friendships, are under threat.

When reading this passage I was reminded of a section in John's Gospel where the crowds are turning away from Jesus, who then says to his disciples - well are you going to go too? And Peter replies in John 6:68 “to whom shall we go, you have the words of eternal life.” A different context from Jeremiah, but a sense also that deep within, even though it may cause suffering, deep within, truth is to be found in the presence of Christ, in the service of God.

Our passage ends in the manner of Psalms with similar themes. Having lamented his lot, having cried out to God, Jeremiah then praises God, and acknowledges the might and power of God. In all his doubts and fears and anger, still he acknowledges the presence of the God of faithfulness and power in his life and in the world.

This moment of praise and assurance lasts but a moment before the lamentation continues, but it is there at the heart of who he is and what he is about. It is there as the inspirer of his very being.

In today's New Testament reading which I have to say is not much easier than the one from Jeremiah, Jesus prepares the disciples of Matthew's Gospel for those things which their discipleship might involve.

Matthew has a particular style and context to it, which we cannot go into today but which is important for the reading of that Gospel. Here Jesus speaks in stark terms of how discipleship might, and probably will, lead his followers into conflict within their own communities and even within their own households as they respond to that whisper of a voice which is to be proclaimed from the rooftops.

A whisper of a voice, or a burning in our hearts - is this an experience that we share? God's call upon us, whispering at times, burning at others, sometimes nagging away at us, sometimes calling to us in the words of others.

As Christ calls, even when that message is unpalatable for the world, even if it causes conflict within our own lives, even though we may feel hopeless and inadequate in our response, even if the events around us cause us to despair and perhaps to doubt, yet where else can we go, other than remain in the company of God, where we are called to be.

It is that calling which invites us from being observers of faith, from virtual discipleship, into active discipleship.

Over the past months we have traced the experience of the disciples as they have gone from lock-down, to Pentecost. They have moved from being virtual disciples, watching but not really active, through to disciples filled with the spirit which whispers and burns within them. The Spirit which calls them from the closed room into a world with possibilities and dangers and conflicts. Called from virtual discipleship to encounter.

Sometimes, I would suggest, our discipleship can feel more virtual than real. Times when we are more watching from the sidelines, rather than being engaged. This can happen whether or not we are in "lock-down" and whether or not our churches are open or closed. But perhaps in these months, whilst enjoying and benefitting from all that has been offered, there might for some be a feeling of the worshipping, active life of discipleship having been put on one side - like so many other things - for the time being.

Our readings today, set in a different context and in a different world, nevertheless remind us that God's calling is real and that it invites us to real engagement with Christ. That the warmed heart and the whisper in the ear are so much more than a zoom invitation to a virtual meeting, because they come to change our lives and to encourage us to witness in word and deed within the world as it is today.

Such an invitation may be to active work through our employed or volunteering lives, it may be through praying for others, it may be through deepening our own understanding and prayer life, it may be in so many other ways, but the call continues.

"His word is in my heart like a fire" proclaims Jeremiah

"What is whispered in your ear proclaim from your roof" Jesus says in Matthew

May God who calls, help us to discern his direction for our lives of discipleship, may Christ who whispers in our ear strengthen us to serve him in this age, may the Spirit who warms our hearts fill us with hope and joy. Amen