

There are 3 possible readings set for the main service each Sunday in the Common Worship lectionary – readings that will be being used and thought about in most churches this morning. I found today's gospel reading so uncomfortable, that I looked carefully at the epistle and the Old Testament readings, to see if one of them was less challenging! But no. All three are equally emphatic about the total claim on our lives of turning to Christ and enrolling in His service - as we all did in our baptism and confirmation. He gave His life for us. And invites us to live our lives for Him.

And it is invitation – the same invitation He gave to those first followers of His - to share in His mission of changing this world into His kingdom of love and justice and well-being, from the ugly place of cruelties and injustices that it was ... and in many ways still is – where wealth and power so easily corrupt - and blind those who wield them to the worth and needs of those without either.

But Jesus was clear, from all we read in the gospel accounts, about the cost of following him, that it was dangerous – in that, like him, his disciples would be ridiculed and accused of all manner of things. And it was no figure of speech when he told them to “take up their cross” as he was doing. Ten of them, to the best of our knowledge, were tortured to death, just as Jesus was, for continuing his work of proclaiming the good news of the kingdom. They were persecuted, as he warned them that they would be – but they are told not to be afraid. Not to be afraid of speaking openly about all they had seen and experienced and been taught by Jesus. Or of living by his ways rather than the ways of the world, serving others and treating all lives as mattering – with the least in the world's eyes, coming first with them as they did with Him.

I don't think any of us will face death or imprisonment for speaking openly of our relationship with God – or of what our faith means to us and has to offer others – forgiveness – healing- astonishing grace - - and peace and freedom to be the people we were created to be -black, white, abled or disabled, indigenous or refugee – whatever our background or whatever we have made of life so far - the dearly loved and valued sons and daughters of God.

And yet, we are afraid of shouting it from the housetops - afraid of embarrassing ourselves – and afraid of other people's reactions – afraid of causing division or upset in our family, or work or social relationships or of losing our own place and social standing in the eyes of others.

And so we find these words about not putting family or friendships, possessions or our standing in society before our obeying of Christ, hard to accept. We all want to keep relationships harmonious in all areas of our lives – and our own life safe - and the longer we leave making known to others that we belong totally to Christ, and that He comes first in our lives, the harder it is.

I think of the real story of two men who worked side by side with each other in an office for many years, with neither ever mentioning to the other the part that faith and church and prayer played in their lives. Until one day they both went to some Christian event – and on seeing each other said “What are you doing here?” ...only to discover that they were each churchwardens in their respective parishes, men of faith and prayer with a lot in common - and yet neither had ever revealed or shared the fact that they Christians in all the years they had known each other.

We’ve spoken a lot over the years of St Michael’s being like the “city set on a hill which can’t be hidden” that Jesus mentioned. And perhaps have focussed too much on the building being visible from right across the whole neighbourhood. And I know of one person who took that phrase from St Matthew’s gospel to mean the activities that happen on the church site being a beacon for the world around us. Those activities are all part of the church’s serving of our neighbours – which is why I am rejoicing that we are about to open the Community Fridge again for people to come and take food at no cost. But such activities are only a part of things, a small part of each of our lives, whether worshipping on a Sunday or making things like the café happen.

The light that we are told not to hide, is there in the whole of our lives, wherever we are, whoever we are with, whatever we are doing. And we simply – or not so simply – have to not cover it up – not keep it secret – not deny it. .... and let others see what we have and are in Christ as naturally as we speak of anything else in our lives that is central to our lives, whatever the cost.

It is costly being a member of Christ. That is the message of today’s gospel passage – and all those others about selling everything you have to possess the pearl of great price – the field with the hidden treasure in it. If we would have life in all its fullness, we have to let go of all the many other things we try to cling on to – most of which begin with the words “self” or “my” ... self- consciousness ... self-pity ... self- indulgence - and trust ourselves to the One who wants to give us, and those around us, so much more and let us know we are worth the world to Him – and have the freedom, from Him, to live as Jesus did, as His beloved children, ready to his will.

And there’s a song from way back that puts all this into words far better than I can. Laurie and James both remember it from their childhood days, as I do, though I’ve not heard it for a long time. And so James has recorded himself singing it for me, , for us to listen to and reflect on as we move into our time of worship.