

Sermon preached at St John's, Alresford for Trinity 12 2021

Ephesians 6: 1<sup>2</sup> For our struggle is not against enemies of blood and flesh, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers of this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places.

I have been reading a book called "The humble church" by Martyn Percy. He writes very well, as the Head of an Oxford College, and his books are never dull. In this book he speaks about how some church leaders are trying to turn the church into something which it is not. He explains how often the church cannot learn some obvious lessons from the world around. He goes on "Meanwhile, a posse of ex-bankers and former civil servants are given free rein to reform the church in much the way they please". I don't know very much about this, but it chimes with one or two things I have stumbled across.

Someone I know well, a younger person, said to me not long ago that the Church of England is "a failing church". It is full of old people. Well, it is true that the congregation is mainly elderly – I wish it was full! It is hard to imagine many churches having a congregation in twenty years' time.

\*But before we have yet another swipe at the Church of England, it is worth noting that all the churches of western Europe are in much the same condition. Younger people don't want to belong to organisations: they come to church only for a specific purpose. So the Church of England is not specifically worse: indeed it is still trying to be a presence in every community.

\*I was reading this week about the church in the 1930s and 1940s. It was a very exciting time. T.S.Eliot produced "Murder in the Cathedral", Dorothy Sayers wrote "The man born to be king", while C.S.Lewis gave lectures on Christianity during the war and produced many books, most significantly "The Chronicles of Narnia" and J R R Tolkien wrote his "Hobbit" and "the Fellowship of the Ring". There was a whole movement for religious drama which survived until very recent times with Theatre Roundabout visiting

this church. But that presentation of Christianity is no longer a force to be reckoned with. It simply is not happening.

So, what are we going to do? I think that is a question that the church has been asking as long as I have known the church. All that time there has been a "disconnect" between the church and society as a whole. We imagine that there must be a way through. How do we find that? What do we have to do?

\*But reflect on Jesus for a moment or two. How many people did he have supporting him? Well, he had 12 disciples. Sometimes they supported him, but much of the time they got in the way. They were often stupid or stubborn or, in the case of James and John, impatient.

\*So, what did Jesus have to say about this? He warned the disciples that those who wished to save their lives would lose them. But those who were willing to lose their lives for the Gospel would save their lives. I imagined, for many years, that he was talking to each one of us about our own lives. Now I realise that he was talking to the whole church.

\*After all, what are we meant to be preaching? Are we meant to be preaching the church or preaching Jesus? We have become obsessed with saving the church – so obsessed that we are in danger of forgetting Jesus and what he said.

The temptation in such a situation is to cut corners, to do things that people have not done before. We hold a mission and hope that some speaker who comes for a week will somehow reach the parts that no other speaker will reach. We can justify almost any way of doing things because this is about the church or the Gospel.

\*The difficulty is that Jesus did not do this. Jesus did not send for squadrons of angels to fight for him when he prayed in the garden of Gethsemane. Jesus did not outwit his opponents by and large except through humour on some occasions. The one thing everyone knows about Jesus is that he died on the Cross. Jesus was called to die on the cross for the world. Not to kill but to be killed. Ever since one could say his was "a failing way" to change the world.

\*But Jesus was clear that if we want to follow him we must take up our

cross and follow him. That means walking the same road. That means living in the same way that he did. It rules out trying to browbeat people, manage people or put pressure on people. That is very clear.

The writer to the Church in Ephesus warns them of spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places. If you like, they are represented by St Peter, by James and John or by Judas Iscariot in the Gospel story. These were disciples who thought they could force the pace. They were not evil people in the mould of Hitler. They were good intentioned people who did not have enough respect for other people. They wanted to take over.

\*In today's church there are people who find it difficult to live with "the pain of the cross". They want to be successful and who can blame them. No-one wants to be "a failure". So some leaders want to force the pace. They want to compel people or put pressure on them. They sometimes take no account of circumstances but simply lay out demands that must be met. These suggest a lack of trust. If Jesus could trust his disciples to carry on his work, why can we not trust?

\*Sometimes they want to appeal to our desire to survive. But we are called to live with the pain and "failure" of the cross on which Jesus died. We know the world is broken, that God sees our world upside down. If the church makes sense to us, then it is probably not reflecting what God wants. If God stands over against his world, the church will need to as well.

\*We should know better. The weapons we need to protect ourselves from spiritual wickedness in the heavenly place are very ordinary: things like truth, the Word of God, humility and so on. We are not in the business of forcing people or manipulating people: we are there to encourage, to teach, to invite. We are not in the business of being a "successful church". We are in the process of taking up our cross and living with the pain and failure of the cross through which we find resurrection.