

Readings:

Romans 12.9-end

Matthew 16.21-end

Introduction

As well as having the honour of leading and preaching at the Minster once a month, I am lucky enough to go along to St Peter's in Woodmansey once a month as well.

I was there a couple of weeks ago, and was unsure what I should preach on.

The lectionary readings were ok – yes, I've just said that the Bible is “ok”... – but I felt I should try to work out what I thought of the events of the week before in Charlottesville.

I know a lot has happened in the news since then, but I hope you can remember what went on!

As I was trying to work out my own thoughts and ideas I was reminded of this picture...

It's not a new one: it's been around for ages in various iterations, but it happened to pop up and give me the spark I needed to form my thoughts on responding to hatred in a situation like Charlottesville.

Little did I know that a couple of weeks later I'd have this awesome passage from Romans to preach on which gives even more help!

Here Paul is giving us a list of virtues that he thinks us as Christians should be able to manage to live by.

Qualities that we will all have, whether that's naturally or by working at it.

When I first read these verses, it fills my heart with joy.

I think: what an awesome world it would be if we all live like this!

How wonderful the early community of believers must have been, all living this way!

And then, of course, my anxiety, my lack of confidence, my fears kick in.

I'm not good enough to manage all of this, Lord.

I can't possibly live up to this high standard.

I don't have the strength.

Does anyone else ever feel like that?

Look, we aren't the only ones!

Well, when you do, remember verse 12 from this reading:

Rejoice in hope; be patient in suffering; persevere in prayer.

We're going to worship and pray together now by singing Strength will rise, praying to the Lord to give us the strength to live our lives the way that He has meant us to...

Sermon

In the first reading this morning we heard a list of how to live as a follower of Christ.

That list of super solid virtues and qualities that we must possess.

And in the second reading Jesus is making it super clear that by living in this way, things are going to be tough.

Thinking back to that list of Paul's, if he was suggesting things like being heroic or courageous in battle, something dramatic and noticeable, then maybe they'd be easier as there is more recognition for that.

Parades are given, statues are built, and column inches in newspapers devoted to such people.

That isn't too much of a cross to bear, is it?

Paul seems to know this; instead he lists the qualities that require long term work.

The unnoticed virtues.

The ones that aren't box office exciting.

Love. Respect. Patience. Perseverance.

These have to be practiced every minute of every day.

I know I'm certainly struggling with patience a lot at the moment with Isla fully embracing the terrible twos...!

Paul knows this – well, maybe not about Isla – but he understands that these are amongst the most trying skills to acquire.

Reading through his letters, they aren't easy to him either!

So when he lists them, he uses emphasized and emphatic language to exaggerate them.

We must love with a passion.

Be competitively respectful.

Zealous in service.

Joyful in hope.

Almost embarrassingly hospitable.

Getting these qualities right every day doesn't come by accident, they come through hard work and perseverance.

Much like you have to do to be the best in your chosen field, or in a sport.

Except, when you put that much work into getting on in the world, or into sport, you get recognition for it.

Paul wants the readers to understand that they cannot expect to be loved and admired for the work they put in for these virtues.

No, instead, the harder they work at these Christian virtues, the more they will be different from society around them.

It will go against the status quo, and that often results in dislike and persecution.

No one will understand why they do what they do, and irritatingly, Paul says that they just have to put up with that.

No explanations.

No full page ads or hours of air time.

No way of telling the world, "you're wrong, we're right".

And certainly no thoughts of getting your own back on the persecution and misunderstanding and unkind words and sneering.

How hard does this seem?

Allowing people to despise and dishonour us because we will not use their own weapons to defend ourselves.

It seems beyond hard, and beyond counter-intuitive, because surely Jesus would want us to plainly explain to those mockers why we have chosen the correct path.

It's as if Paul knows that the path that those conversations so often lead to is to conflict, and disagreement, and argument, and anger.

Jesus knows this, which is why when Peter gets a bit uppity and tells Jesus off for suggesting he will go calmly and meekly to his fate rather than fighting his corner Jesus is so forceful with his response.

Peter is saying, "No mate, you're the messiah, we've all agreed, and messiahs *win*, and then everyone will worship him."

Of course this would have been a massive temptation for Jesus: to take the way that Peter suggests, but Jesus knew that this would have only led to the cycle of death and violence continuing.

That isn't God's way.

No, God's way is to bring life, so Jesus uses his immense power not to subjugate the people around him, but he uses his power to love them and to endure.

Jesus explains this simply to the disciples, that by following him, they will have to sacrifice so much.

That by taking up that cross – literal for some of them, metaphorical for us – they will face persecution and ridicule, and lose friends, family, reputation, or even their life.

This is the choice we must make as Christians, when we commit to dedicate ourselves to living the way that Paul suggests.

We have to realise that this means taking up our cross, and the consequences for this might mean losing so much: friends, family, jobs, reputation, or even our life.

But it also means gaining so much.

We gain a community who will help us to imitate Jesus.

We get to be a part of helping to grow the Kingdom of God here on Earth.

And we gain eternal life through our Lord Jesus Christ.

Amen.