

Homily for 12th May Holmbury and Wotton



Texts: Acts 1:15-17, 21-end, John 17: 6-19

‘The Lord is the stronghold for the oppressed, a stronghold in times of trouble. And those who know your name put their trust in you, for you, O Lord, have not forsaken those who seek you.’

Psalm 9:9

A man had got himself into difficulties while swimming and now to his horror saw a shark open mouthed fast approaching him and, in utter terror, called out to God to save him. At which point he actually heard the voice of God saying: ‘You are an atheist. Why are you calling on me when you do not believe in me?’ Aghast with confusion and with the shark drawing ever nearer the man knowing he could not lie replied. “Well, that’s true I don’t believe in you, but how about the shark? Can you make the shark believe in you?”

And reflecting on this silly story made me realise the truth of the saying ‘there are no atheists in a foxhole. In his desperate need that seemingly professed atheist called out to the one and only person he knew of who might save him from his deadly peril. And when in his honesty he admitted he didn’t really have the right to expect any help from God he still held the belief, the trust that God might act through that shark.

Trust, belief in the eternal power of God is a theme which occurs throughout the Bible. Think of Noah trusting in God and carrying out his seemingly ridiculous idea of building a great ark on dry land miles from any water in order that he and his family along with an uncountable number of animals would be saved from the engulfing flood that God was promising. Think of Abraham whose trust in God led him to leave his home and all that was familiar and travel hundreds of miles to an unknown country. A trust that was to be tested even further when God called upon him to sacrifice his son Isaac. Think of that young shepherd boy David confronting the giant Goliath with just his trusty sling and five smooth stones. And think especially this

morning of those disciples who had witnessed so much since that day when their Lord and Master Jesus had been put to death. Witnessed his horrific death, his resurrection appearances and then seen him taken up into heaven. The man they had followed for the past three years had gone seemingly leaving them alone while the sharks which were the priests, the scribes and the Pharisees circled dangerously around them determined to refute that witness. And yet there is no hint of despair, no hint that maybe they should just return to their old lives and forget about all that had happened. But no. their trust remained steadfast in their belief that what Jesus had promised and prayed for on their behalf would be realised. The prayer Jesus Christ made to his Father that we read of in today's gospel that they should be protected from the 'evil one' and all those circling sharks. The prayer that they might be sanctified in order to empower them to carry on Christ's work in the world and in so doing might know the joy that comes with serving Christ. Would we have remained as steadfast as those men and indeed women too, or would we have made a run for it? That we will never know but what we can recognise is how their story and the stories of so many others in the Bible help us no matter what the circumstances to have complete trust in God and his purposes for us.

Last Wednesday was the feast day of Julian of Norwich whose own deep rooted faith and trust in the ever-loving purposes of God famously led her to declare: 'And all things shall be well, and all manner of things should be well.' Julian who also wrote: But God wants us to **trust** that he is always with us. He accompanies us in three ways; in heaven, where in his rising he raises us up with him; on earth, where he leads us day by day; and in our innermost being, where he constantly dwells to guide and preserve us. And this is our comfort- that we know in faith that Christ is constantly with us. Knowing this, we shall never succumb to the pain and woe, but **always hope** for another glimpse of his presence.

I love this concept of the three ways of God accompanying us but most of all the reminder that come what may and especially when those sharks start to circle he hears us and is constantly with us, constantly by our side, The sharks of ill health, of grief, of depression, of all the worries and fears we may hold about the future for ourselves and our loved ones and even the shark of disbelief which if we are honest can on occasions threaten all of us. And going back to those disciples I am quite sure they were not exempt from the threat of some of these sharks at times but it was their faith and trust that remained constant; faith and trust that God would indeed protect and guard them as Jesus Christ had asked him to do.

From experience I know those sharks can seem horribly real and it can be very hard not to allow ourselves to as it were to lose trust in those words of Julian that 'All shall be well, and all manner of things shall be well.' But here I turn to these words from Proverbs 'Trust in the Lord with all your heart and be not wise in your own sight' or as another translation has it: 'Trust in the Lord with all your hearts, and do not rely on your own insight.' When those sharks circle, we are I think all too prone to think of all the ways in which we consider God should deal with them instead of recognising that God with his unparalleled wisdom and power works in his own divine way which in faith and trust we are called to accept with grateful humility. When we are tempted to suggest to God through our prayers what ought to be done, we have to remember those words which demand that we have complete trust in God's providence to protect and guard us. And again, looking back at say both Abraham and David their lives were far far from straightforward, and they constantly found themselves up against a variety of sharks but neither of them ever faltered in their faith, their commitment to serve the Lord God come what may and trusting in him to lead them forward. So too those early disciples showed that same tenacious faith and trust echoing that of Christ himself when as all those sharks bearing the sins of the whole world circled him, he offered up his life in obedience and in trust to the Father's will declaring 'Father into your hands I commend my spirit'.

I do not pretend having this sort of faith this sort of trust in God to save and defend is easy but then anything that is worth aspiring to is never meant to be easy. We have to work at our faith continually just as any truly ambitious athlete works at their fitness or a craftsperson dreaming of producing that perfect object keeps honing their skills. But in continually working at and honing our faith especially when sharks circle, we will I pray, discover the faithful joy knowing that all things are safe in God's presence. And in so knowing recognise the truth of Julian's words 'And all shall be well, and all manner of things shall be well.'