

St. Mary's Sermons

Date of Sermon: 12th January 2020

Matthew 6:19-34, text for 2020 & Psalm 91

At the start of last year, when I chose Hebrews 10 vs 23, let us hold unswervingly to the hope that we profess ***for he who has promised is faithful***, and let us consider how we might spur one another on to love and good works, as our text for the year, I had absolutely no idea just how appropriate that verse would prove to be for so many of us. I can't remember exactly now why I chose it, except to say that I had personally found it helpful in the situations that we encountered back in 2018. Despite the numerous difficulties that we faced I had resolved to continue to trust in the goodness of God. We proved in numerous ways God's faithfulness towards us. Time and time again he had answered our prayers, giving us strength not just to survive but to continue to fulfil the ministry he has called us to. I discovered in a fresh way that the joy of the Lord really is my strength. Worshipping him even though I have often not felt like doing so has proved to be a great blessing. And I know just how much we as a family appreciated all the love and support of the church family, which continues to be a great blessing and encouragement to this day.

The Queen in her Christmas Day message referred to last year as being a bumpy year. She was not just referring to personal family issues but also national issues, particularly in relation to Brexit and I know for all sorts of different reasons, that many of you would echo her sentiments. For many of us the past year has been a particularly difficult and painful year. But I also know because you have told me that your testimony like ours is that although at times it has been very tough, God is faithful. He has been there for you, just as he has been for us, giving you the strength to carry on loving and serving him. Without doubt we can say: God is good all the time. All the time God is good.

It is sometimes said when things go wrong in our lives that God is testing your faith. I'm not sure that I totally agree with that statement. However, it is easy

to say that we believe in God, but in practice be nothing more than a Sunday Christian. Sometimes God does allow things to happen to see if we genuinely believe, to take us out of our comfort zone, to see if we will allow our faith to affect the way we live when it really matters. God definitely does not test us in order to try to trip us up, or get us to deny our faith but to cause it to grow.

One thing is abundantly clear, that when you encounter difficulties and put your faith into action, it grows and becomes stronger, as you see God at work in your life answering prayer. Through it God develops your character and you also become a better person. Both Romans 5:4 and James 1: 3 back this up. Paul writes, we rejoice in our sufferings because we know that suffering produces perseverance, perseverance character and character hope: and James says, consider it pure joy whenever you face trials of many kinds because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance. Perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete lacking nothing. In one sense all this does not make it any easier when you going through times but we know that God can turn the situation around and use even the most difficult situation for our good.

Over Christmas I read the former Blue Peter presenter and sky sports football commentator Simon Thomas' book, love interpreted in which he recounts the amazing way that his church family stood by him when his wife Gemma, tragically died suddenly of AML, just three days after being diagnosed. His frank account reminded me just how important it is that we not only rejoice with those who rejoice but also weep with those who weep. I'm sure we are all very good at doing the first bit, it is easy to rejoice with those who rejoice, after all we all like hearing good news stories but the second part, weeping with those who weep, is much, much, more difficult to do. Sometimes we just

don't know what to say to someone who is struggling to come to terms with something that has happened to them and the temptation is to avoid them altogether. We make excuses for ourselves by saying, we know that there are no easy answers and want to avoid using useless platitudes. Sometimes all we can do is to be there for someone, offering a shoulder for them to cry on in their hour of need. Sometimes it is the little practical things that show we really care. For example the phone call to remind people we have not forgotten them and that we are praying for them, which are worth more than a thousand words. And just being there for them for the long haul.

Right from the very early days a characteristic mark of the Church has been the genuine love for others. It was this practical love for each other that proved to be so attractive to those outside of the church, not as we might expect the incredible miracles that the disciples performed. Several times in the early chapters of the book of Acts Luke has those lovely little summary verses which express the genuine surprise of those outside of the fellowship at the way that the believers lived. All this reminds us just how important it is that we continue to look out for one another, to go the extra mile, to put other people's needs before our own and as the verse from Hebrews puts it, to spur one another on to love and good works.

So, you will be pleased to hear much more briefly, to our verse for this year: Matthew 6:33 seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness. The intention is that it builds on our verse from last year. As we start not just a new year but also a new decade it gives us a good opportunity for us both as individuals and as a church to reassess our priorities. Given the hectic pace of modern life it is easy to get side-tracked by the world's agenda: to invest all our time and effort in the pursuit of material possessions and the trappings that

these things can bring that if we are not careful we can miss out on the blessings that God has for us.

As Christians we know that we should have a totally different agenda to those who are not followers of Jesus. We know that we should put the kingdom of God first but that is not always easy. In practice seeking the kingdom of God means we prioritise amongst other things: coming regularly to worship, making time to read the bible and pray, giving of our time and money to serve God, sharing our faith with other people and spending time with other Christians in fellowship. In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus taught us that when we do put God first in our lives he promises that rather than miss out on our basic needs he will make sure that we are provided for, that he will bless us with those things as well. Jesus tells us not to worry about these things because God actually know that we need them.

I love Psalm 91 which spells out very clearly and practically the blessings that we can expect for following the Lord wholeheartedly. It contains some amazing promises that we can trust God to fulfil in our lives: that we can pray for and claim both for ourselves and others.

Vs 1 he who dwells in the shelter of the most high will rest in the shadow of the almighty.

Vs2. I will say of the Lord he is my refuge and my fortress my God in whom I trust.

Vs14FF. "Because he loves me," says the LORD, "I will rescue him; I will protect him, for he acknowledges my name. He will call on me, and I will answer him; I will be with him in trouble, I will deliver him and honour him. With long life I will satisfy him and show him my salvation."