

Sunday after Ascension 2018

Do not wonder, brethren, that the world hates you. We know that we have passed out of death into life, because we love the brethren. I John 3.13,14

The headline of the colourful newspaper page that was blowing down the sunny street last week was “Teeny Weeny Beany”; I was curious and so I stopped to find out more. It was a joyful account of the miraculous survival and subsequent flourishing of a baby boy called Frankie, born at 24 weeks and weighing less than a tin of baked beans-hence the title of the article. There was a picture of mother and child on their safe return home from hospital.

Many in the world regard us as a moral anachronism, a moral dinosaur, if we deviate from the widely received wisdom that abortion is a normal, albeit sometimes rather sad part of life. It is a nice question and an important one, discerning where medical procedure ends and taking a life begins: but the Church, and I am glad to say that this includes the Church of England, is a very long way removed from the judgement of the world in this matter. This became clear in the General Synod debates this February on what is euphemistically described as ‘non-invasive pre-natal testing’ for Down’s Syndrome. I was very glad to be part of it and for that to be my final memory of being a member of General Synod for these last 6 years. The unanimous voice of GS was compassionate, humane and deeply Christian. Which cannot be taken for granted.

“The hour is coming when whoever kills you will think he is offering service to God.” John 16.2 A warning much in the same vein as that with which I began: *“Do not wonder, brethren, that the world hates you.”* If we Christians are aligned with the world and offer a pleasing reflection back to it, for its own satisfaction, then it is unlikely to hate us. It might occasionally poke us, with a stick, like a farmer with his cattle, if we overstep the mark. But to hate us? To kill us? It will do that when it senses that perhaps we aren’t fully signed up to its programme and to its judgements. When it senses that we know, in our hearts and souls, in the very core of our beings, that there is more to life than this world.

I cannot encourage you to set yourself deliberately at variance with the world *just for the sake of it*: but we are in the world, not of it. We know that, although we have worldly tasks to get on with- many of them God-given- we are citizens of another city, pilgrims on our way home, wayfarers, sojourners, having here, as St Paul puts it so beautifully, “no abiding city”.

Elijah and Elisha were strangers on earth, like those first apostles and disciples: they caught more than a glimpse of God and of the heavenly realities, and for the most part never looked back. Remember Abraham with Isaac, who is disguised as his brother Esau. Abraham says “Come near and kiss me, my son.” And when Isaac came near, wearing Esau’s clothes, *Abraham smelled the smell of his garments and blessed him and said: “See, the smell of my son is as the smell of a field which the Lord has blessed!”*

So it is with us: God calls us to be a *fragrant* offering, redolent not of this world but of the one that is to come, the one into which we have been baptized and made citizens. We are journeying home and are called to encourage others to journey with us: they complicate matters by calling that work of encouragement MISSION!

So, whether it is on a grand scale, or whether it is on the local and seemingly mundane, it matters that the world recognizes that we are strangers here, citizens of another country, our clothing fragrant with the perfume of the fields of heaven. It might be when we stand our ground *for the sake of Christ* in our workplace, or in our school or college. It might be when we witness to his love for the sake of our neighbour or colleague or fellow-worshipper - going an extra mile somehow; it might be, as we get older, in our life of prayer, holding before God the many people whose lives are too hectic just now for much prayer. It might have been in the prayers, skill and care offered by those medical staff to tiny baby Frankie, weighing less than a tin of beans. How light do you have to be not to matter? In God’s sight the life of each of us is beyond price, and he has asked us to remind the world of this in as many ways as we can. Thanks be to God.