

GO NOW!

Confirmation, Westminster Abbey

Sunday 26th June 2016

Trinity V

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In these last few apocalyptic days we have had more than our fair share of rain. Last Thursday, to avoid a three hour hold-up I had to turn off the M1 motorway as it was closed by flooding. Only yesterday we were out in the car caught in the mother of all thunderstorms.

It reminded me of a story that you may have heard. A good devout Christian man hears a forecast of a serious flood on its way. He says his prayers – asking God to warn him to act when they come. His prayer is answered – God will act. So, the floods come and already there is about six inches of water or more covering the street. A policeman passes and tells the man to leave his house. ‘No worry’, the man says, ‘God will warn me.’

So the rains continue and the water is up to the window. Round come the fire brigade: Leave your home they say. But the man stays, giving them the same reply. By now he’s had to go upstairs and now a lifeboat passes the window. ‘Jump in’, says the lifeboat-man, but the man doggedly stays. ‘God will act.’ Finally, he climbs on to the roof. A helicopter hovers, but still the man protests in similar words! ‘God will warn me.’ The rain goes on and the man is swept away and that’s that. Arriving at the gate of heaven, as God welcomes him, he complains – why didn’t you do anything? God replies: ‘Well come on now – I sent you a policeman, the fire brigade, a lifeboat and even a helicopter! What more were you expecting?!’

Why did that man put off taking action? Both our first reading and our gospel offer similar messages. In our reading, Elisha wants to return to his parents and kiss them before he joins Elijah. Then, in Jesus’ encounter with possible followers, one man wants to bury his father, another wishes to return home to say farewell first. But both these stories suggest an urgency - don’t put things off, don’t procrastinate, don’t say ‘not today but tomorrow.’

Now that message could not be better suited to us today. For Omar, Thomas, Sasha, Patrick, Elisabeth, Oscar and Alistair have certainly not put things off. They have responded to God’s call; they have prepared for confirmation; they are now to be confirmed. No need to worry about police, fire brigade, lifeboats or helicopters – all of you have seen that when God calls, his Spirit within us prompts us to follow him. In a most invigorating phrase St. Paul said to us on our second reading: ‘For freedom Christ has set us free.’ That offers a marvellous image of God’s Spirit nerving our arms, inspiring us – that means literally breathing God’s Spirit into our lungs.

So there it is, nothing more to be said. All is done and dusted – nothing more to do – but wait just a minute, I wonder. . .

Let’s go back to the slightly comic, but also slightly tragic story with which I began. There, despite everything, the man was drowned. What went wrong? Perhaps the key is that young man’s perception of how God works in our lives. The floods came and there could not have been more opportunities for the man to escape. But he appeared to be expecting something else. Was he expecting God to speak to him in a vision? Was he expecting an angel from heaven? Was he expecting to be swept up by Jesus in some sort of miraculous way that almost rendered the flood unimportant?

When he is finally confronted by God, his Maker and Redeemer, he is challenged. I sent you all these things – police, fire brigade, lifeboat, helicopter and you ignored every one of them. Out of this spring two key challenges for us. The first is to remember that God reveals himself to us for most of the time in the ordinary happenings of life. Each of those who came to help that rather feckless man were, in the end, empowered by the Spirit and Grace of God. Anything we do, ultimately would be impossible without God’s grace. It is almost like the life-giving air we breathe.

But having seen that – and accepting that God does sometimes appear to us in visionary ways – there’s one more element for each of us to remember. God was expecting that young man to take

the initiative – follow the policeman, jump on the fire engine, leap into the lifeboat, hang on to the rope from the helicopter. So that much remains up to us.

In a few moments, we shall come to the confirmation itself. Part of the action will be to remind you all of your baptism. I shall do some sprinkling and some of you will get wet! This reminds us that each of these things is another step along the road – baptism, completed in confirmation, then communion, then the rest of our lives unfolding before us. In the old confirmation rite as each person was confirmed the bishop said ‘Defend, O Lord, this servant with thy heavenly grace that he/she may continue there for ever and daily increase in thy Holy Spirit more and more until he shall come to thy everlasting kingdom.’ Confirmation is part of a journey.

So, in that case, today marks but one key moment in the journey of the Christian life. What else might you be called to? Might you like me, the Dean, Father Christopher, be called to be a priest? Might you be called to the religious life? You may need to watch out for the signs – just like that young man didn’t. This is an exciting moment for you all – what further surprises has God in store for you?
Amen

Readings

I Kings. 19. 15-15, 19-end.

Galatians 5. 13-25.

Luke 9. 51 to end.