

August 16th 2018 11.00 am MP. Christchurch Totland Trin.13th

Psalm 141
1 John 4 7-12

“All of us fall short of the Glory of God”.

That is what we are told.

We don't like to fall short of anything we strive to attain to, and we Christians are especially aware of the standards God has set and the incredible difficulty we have in living up to them.

I think it was Samuel Becket who wrote, “ I try and I fail; I try again and fail again, but I fail better”. The suggestion... that if we seek to remain constant we will improve and it might become easier!

In recent times with all that is going on around, what with Brexit and America, and Messers BoJo, Farage, Trump et al and to top it, the sexual sickness in the Roman Church in America and in Ireland....and much much more, I am meeting a side of myself which I don't much like.

I find I am critical and judgemental. I have become opinionated and angry. I see the extreme views that others hold and hardly can stop myself getting on board, and shutting my eyes to the middle way.

Actually, there probably isn't a middle way.

The truth is likely to be at the extreme, but it will not be agreed on unless we meet in the middle. But there is a real problem then, because we may find it easier to remain in the middle, where morality and immorality fuse.....

Where the teachings of Jesus become diluted. Where our Faith in a sick world becomes as sick as the world it seeks to address. Where the terrible words of the Lord to the infant Church in Laodicea are spoken to us.

“You are neither cold nor hot. I wish you were either one or the other! So, because you are lukewarm - neither hot nor cold - I am about to spit you out of my mouth.

But without meeting in the middle, not for the purpose of diluting the message and playing down the truth, but meeting in order to explore together and establish a way of truthful and loving agreement, it simply becomes a shouting match and the winner will be the person with the stronger voice, the louder voice, the one with the most money and the most power and the most worldly influence, the one with friends in the right places...maybe crooked friends or even the side that wins the most votes. The Criminal who wants to rule the world, and the worst scenario of all, a dictatorship that dominates all else.

I was in Scotland a week ago, and on the bonnie bonnie banks of Loch Lomond I was reminded of the old adage: “Some folk take the high road and some folk take the low, and in between on the misty flats, the rest Drift to and fro”.

I don't want to be a drifter.

But when I search for Truth and Righteousness, I find myself becoming proud, and cocky and judgemental of those who just don't get it...and by that, I mean those who just don't see it my way.

My college students of 55 years ago still connect with an annual letter. About 20 of us in all, with probably one sadly falling out each year now.

In this year's, just arrived, one 80 year old who voted Remain now thinks he should have gone the other way. Another, even older says that every time Trump and BoJo appear on his TV screen he wants to throw a boot at them. And some of them are truly wedded to the Institution into which they were ordained, in such a way it seems to have long since imprisoned them.

The first two parties would each like to think that God is on his side. Then those wedded to the Church are confident they are on God's side. I doubt our differences will result in any exploration together because our time has almost run out.

The Bible says that all of us fall short of the Glory of God. That is no comfort.

When the stakes are high, we can become very judgemental, not simply about the worldwide implications of all that is going on and should be terrifying us, but of those, even those near and dear to us, with whom we disagree.

My surviving brother and I stand on different political platforms. We think quite differently about Christian definitions too. We wait for different trains. It wasn't always so. I have moved...he hasn't. He is where he was as a young man and where our father stood before. And we take care not to discuss the differences too seriously, because that might push us apart. Being brothers we don't want that and besides, we don't live close enough to follow it through.

Some words of the late Archbishop Bloom ring in my ears. "Do not Judge...Suspend Moral Judgement".
Seek after truth; search for righteousness; love the other man.
Suspend mortal judgement....

How do I do that? I must Listen.....
Listen to my brother, to my sister, to my friend, to my colleague, to my neighbour.

No one can do it for me...only I can change my life and my viewpoint. And no change is possible unless I listen to and understand where others are. Of course, I also hope they will hear me.

St Jerome wrote, "Good, Better, Best. Never let it rest,
'Til your good is better and your better is best".

Nelson Mandela said, "It always seems impossible until it's done".

Where there is a listening ear, all sorts of things can happen.
I learn where the other is coming from.
I learn the big issues that have given rise to insecurities.
I learn of the occurrences that have made people inveterate liars,
with the desperate need to defend themselves.
I learn why people do not want to be what they are and step onto
another road in order to feel better.
I learn why someone is proud and haughty.
And why I am too..

All of these experiences make us who we have become.
Some experiences were so awful and life is ruined.
The cry for attention may not have been heard and so, why go on
trying to say something in a deaf world?
Why not accommodate to the difficulty?....adapt, run with it, run
away from it ...go with the flow....downstream... the easier route.

A 16 year old anorexic girl sits at the table. The new Psychiatric
nurse examines her records. Looking up after a while, he says ,
"Why don't you try something that you're good at?" "What do you
mean?" the startled girl replies. "Well, you have had so many
unsuccessful goes at ending your life, why don't you try something
else, something you're good at?"
Someone had at last broken through. Someone had heard her cry.
A healing process could begin. When did she BEGIN to shout for
help, and How come nobody had heard her?

Our story needs to be told. Only we know it and who will listen?

Will you do something for me? Only take a minute and you don't have to move!

Breathe along with me.

I put my arm up.....Breathe in.

I lower it...Breathe out.

Once more.

In.....Out.

Thank you.

We just did something together.

Jesus is always on about "Togetherness", about "Unity", about "Listening", about "Forgiving", about "Loving".

And I find myself getting more and more impatient.

Institutionalised religion is little different to most of our mainstream Institutions and just like them, gets in my way.

There is so little opportunity for dialogue, for plain, frank, fearless, earnest, unintimidated speech. Where and how can I express my views, my heartfelt opinions? They maybe wrong views, unbalanced views, opinionated views, inconsiderate and ill-informed views...but how shall I know, without a platform?

Who will hear me out? Who will bend an ear to me? Who will listen?

Institutions won't. Can't.

When my voice is choked off, it starts to become unreasonable. It becomes unbalanced and it becomes loud, sharp and judgemental, belligerent.

I lose patience.

I either shut up or I am told to shut up. Then I give up. What is the point?

A black American descendant of slaves, a grandmother, observing a well known example of White supremacy, and aware of her own "low-life", observed: "Peacocks can strut about but they can't fly".

The peacock's story needs to be told and connected from beginning to end....so the strutting and all that goes with it can stop forever.

It may not happen.....then it will never be able to fly. And it will die.

Can some of you recall words made famous back in the days of your youth by Bob Dylan and Joan Baez.

“Show me the prison, Show me the gaol, show me the prisoners whose lives have gone stale, and I’ll show you a young man with so many reasons why....there but for fortune go you and I.

“Show me the alley, Show me the train, Show me the hobo who sleeps in the rain...

“Show me the country where the bombs had to fall, Show me the ruins of the buildings once so tall.... and I’ll show you a young man with so many reasons why....there but for fortune go you and I....

I would want to replace the word “fortune” with “there but for Jesus go you and I”.

He is my story, He is my song.

In a world where the bombs still fall, the tall buildings still reduce to rubble, the homeless and hopeless still sleep on the streets, the President of the United States is steadily disgraced and our world leaders threaten each other with national annihilation....

wouldn't you think we might have learned something. That is “to listen to one another.” Close up.....not from a distance and with threats and judgements.

What has the Christian to say? What example can the Christian set?

Can Christians talk about it all and dare they hold opinions without agreement?

Can we disagree in love without throwing bricks?

And if we can....Is there an opportunity to do so.

Or are we “YES-MEN” who simply go unquestioningly with the flow? Doing what we are told without challenging the instructions.

I am frightened and disillusioned, if I allow myself to engage with the world I read about and watch.

Retired General Lee Butler, who was head of the US Nuclear Strategic Command, has now a new mission in life, to travel the world speaking for nuclear disarmament . He knows how close the world has been to total self-destruction and how close it has just been with the Nuclear Clock almost on midnight during the past year.

He writes, "We have so far survived the nuclear age by some combination of skill, luck and divine intervention and I suspect the latter in greatest proportion." To that,

He adds a haunting question.

"By what authority does succeeding generations of leaders, in the nuclear weapons States, usurp the power to dictate the odds of continued life on our planet, and most urgently, why does such breath-taking audacity persist at a moment when we should stand trembling in the face of our folly and united in our commitment to abolish its most deadly manifestations?"

His story reflects deep remorse for his many years directing the American Nuclear Armaments Programme.

Naom Chomsky. Philosopher, Cognitive Scientist, Historian, a Jew, writes of the day that a new Era for the human race began. August 6th 1945. Human intelligence had devised a means to destroy ourselves. A new era, the nuclear age and an era unlikely to last very long. In the years following, there have been many near-misses. Today the threat is grown.

Several miracles have saved us thus far but cannot be expected to perpetuate. Either we bring it to an end or it's likely to bring us to an end. The record of danger, he writes, is truly appalling.

The sentiments of Sydney Carter still hold true all these years on,

Charles de Gaulle, he said to me:
I want to have a little bomb like you,

Independent I will be,
I want to have a little bomb like you.
You can wave your Union Jack,
Stars and Stripes are on the back.
I want to have a little bomb like you do,
I want to have a little bomb like you.

Mao Tse Tung to Moscow said:
I want to have a little bomb like you,
My bomb will be twice as Red,
I want to have a little bomb like you.
I like you, and you like me,
But just in case we don't agree,
I want to have a little bomb like you do,
I want to have a little bomb like you.

Everybody says the same,
I want to have a little bomb like you,
I am not the one to blame, ...etc

And another song by Carter "The crow on the cradle"

The sheep's in the meadow, the cows in the corn,
Now is the time for a child to be born.
He'll cry for the moon and laugh at the sun
If he's a boy, he'll carry gun.

Rockaby baby the dark and the light
Somebody's baby is born for a fight
Rockaby baby, the white and the black
Somebody's baby is not coming back.
Sang the Crow on the cradle.

I have just been reading through the last letters of my grandfather, before they buried him in a military grave in Normandy just 40 miles from a village that bears his and my name. Exactly a 100 years ago this June. I never met him. I was born well after he was killed.

Why should I have raised this sort of subject today?

Because I tremble at what is going on in this God-given world I live in.

The reality of conflict is so in my face. I can shut my eyes to a degree and hide away on this glorious island. But put on the TV, listen to the Radio, read the Papers, and a whole other world of conflict is in my face. An ugly tragic world. The attitudes are vitriolic, The words used are wicked. People from the top to the bottom throw judgement and abuse at each other. It barely seems as though some of us share a common humanity.

Dr Cornel West, Professor of Philosophy at Harvard University in his 2018 best speech, talks of a nuclear catastrophe , an Ecological Catastrophe, a Political Catastrophe, a Civic Catastrophe, a Spiritual Catastrophe. Those who believe us to be living in the last days may be close to the truth.

We shall never agree on much but we must agree to disagree in such a way that we keep our common humanity. And we do happen to believe in Jesus gift of Eternal Life.

Friendships are deeper than politics. So too respect and dignity and love. And we happen like few others, to believe in Eternal Life. Not in a vague hope but with certainty.

We sing songs and hymns because they speak to our God and they speak to our hearts and they express truths that we can agree on. And we sing them in unison...expressing the same agreed faith and hope and conviction.....like we just breathed in and out together.

But when I become judgemental then I am no different to the one whom I am judging.

I have some encouraging news for you....

The Bible says, " I have loved you.....with an everlasting love; with loving kindness I have drawn you to myself" Jer.31:1

That's what love does.....draws you. And if love draws, we will talk to each other. No, I mean we will talk with each other

The Psalmist wrote, "My eyes are fixed on you, O Sovereign God". That is the first thing.

Then John writes, "This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us". And, " if we love one another, God lives in us and his love is made complete in us".

We didn't deserve anything, but He saved us and gave us Eternal Life in His son Jesus.

That is heaven. I am in heaven and heaven is in me.

The same aged black Grandma I just quoted also said, "If the Kingdom of God is with you, then anywhere you go you leave something of heaven behind".

That is not a cliché, it is a way of life.

A key word in Scripture is the word,.....Joy, along with the call to Rejoice.

Joy is falling in love with your neighbour and with truth and beauty and goodness.

If you watched the Proms on Friday night you Must have been transported to a higher world as the two Hungarian Roma Violinists, Father and Son played like I have never heard before.

Compare with that truly spiritual experience, what is happening on the world stage where we are dying, it's just a matter of time, and we are caught up in a battle. . What is happening on the World Stage right now is terrifying

The Court cases on show in America at this moment highlight the corruption and the greed that are running amok at the top. And these are the very people who are responsible for law and order. If that doesn't frighten you, it does me.

Did you know that 1% of the world's population own 41% of the world's wealth. That has doubled from 20%, 30 years ago.

Cornel West calls Trump a Gangster.

Our world is full of gangsters

It is not, he insists, a judgement; but a statement, a description.

His attitude to women...he's a gangster.

His attitude to other nations and their leaders... a gangster.

His tweets, without thought, only yesterday to South Africa..

gangster.

You rob, you judge, you destroy with words, you lie without conscience...you are a gangster.

West then says,

" I'm not criticising. I'm not finger-pointing, cos I have got a gangster inside of me. I was a gangster until I met Jesus. Now I am a redeemed sinner with gangster proclivities. I'm likely to break loose and do something ungodly at any moment.. and why? because I'm a human being".

I live in a world full of other human beings

There is the worst of humanity out there but there is also the best
....and there lies hope.

We are witnessing a colossal escalation of failure.

Failure of imagination, Failure of sensitivity, failure in our concern for the vulnerable. The rain and bombs fall and the children die.

We watch massive migrations of poor people.

We watch genocide before our eyes.

We see the destruction of whole cities.

We see the breakup of Europe.

Our own politicians jockeying for position. The emerging New Imperialisms with Britain leading the way. I think it's genocidal as it has historically proven itself to be. But all we seem able to learn from history is that we don't learn from history.

It was Imperialism that put Christianity centre stage at the very beginning, sweeping aside the movement of Love that Jesus began, making it an Institutionalised, secularised National Brand, where so much is invested by the different factions that they are

unable to hear each other or even take each other seriously enough to want to listen.

Most disconcerting of all, when one man is permitted to usurp the power of God and with a single word can over-ride the words of all others. It is a historic, democratic (or autocratic) system that allows this to be. And those who now control, call it Christian. Evangelical Christian

For further reading try the book of Daniel and it will show you where it leads.

How do I speak into that? How do you get a word into all that?
Who will listen?

In despair I become judgemental, and then no one will listen. In Paul's great passage about the weapons of Our warfare, he concludes with the command, that having done all things the people of God are to STAND.

Only those who STAND can fight. It's no-good being on your back. We are to stand against , fight against conformity, against parochialism, against the status quo, against a system that is reluctant to listen, and is intent on perpetuating itself. It can do no other and makes a lot of noise in the doing.

It usually, perhaps always takes a crisis, a catastrophe to get a hearing.

I believe we have a crisis in our world, in our land and in the church

I know of no other way, than to

“Fix my eyes upon Jesus, look full in his wonderful face,
Where the things of earth will grow strangely dim
In the light of his glory and grace.”

And there I discover that “God has spoken to his people, Hallelujah.
And his words are words of Wisdom, Hallelujah.”

To his people, God says “Listen to ME”.

And because I speak to all my people, you must hear EACH OTHER too. And learn to STAND together

I leave you with the question.

When? and How?

And don't all shout at once!!