

## **Morning Worship – Sunday 30<sup>th</sup> August – Trinity 12**

*Sermon – Sarah Penfold*

Romans 12:9-end  
Matthew 16:21-end

### **The Duties of Christians**

So reads the heading above Romans chapter 12 in my Bible, 'The duties of Christians'. Both today's readings are about what is expected of Christians although the tone and the details are different. I personally find the idea of 'duties' rather too prescriptive and inflexible, the sentiments expressed being somehow more about appropriate behaviour. Those of us who have been brownies, guides, cubs or scouts will be familiar with the promise to do 'our duty to God and the Queen, to help other people'. But for today I think we can understand that this is behaviour to God, to others, and to ourselves.

How different are these two passages! Matthew reports on Christ explaining the essence of discipleship – to be prepared to follow into whatever presents itself, to actively 'take up the cross'. Not to just cope with what life might throw at a disciple but to actively seek those things. Throughout the Gospels we see Peter's ineptitude, his not quite understanding, his denial but then we read of his speech at Pentecost. Inspired by the Holy Spirit – yes. Extremely nervous about doing it – almost certainly. Actively doing what he is called to do – yes. Coming out from the house and into the street to speak in public – yes.

This passage certainly puts a different perspective on how we are to view the world. In order to save our lives, we must lose them. Christ is the King but while he is in charge he is not immersed in the normal trappings of kingship. There is no pomp, no battle for leadership. To be part of this our duty is 'to boldly go', or as one commentary I read suggested to take our foot off the bottom in order to swim.

In contrast the passage from Romans focuses on how we behave towards other people, how we show them our love, including how we show our love to our enemies, not by ignoring them but by offering food when they are hungry or a drink when they are thirsty. Conquer evil with good, rather than allowing evil to conquer. When Paul wrote this he was preparing to go to Jerusalem with a collection made by the churches in Asia to help the Christian community in Jerusalem. His plan was to go from there to Rome and then on to Spain. But he already knew that there was a danger to him personally in going to Jerusalem – he still went.

So are these passages at odds with each other? During the week someone quoted to me from a book that she is currently reading, ‘discipleship is more than the adherence to principles’. More than just how we behave as Christians but why we behave in that way. Together they form a model for both how we behave towards God and towards other people.

For those of us immersed in being part of church we can forget how different it looks from the outside. To outsiders we are often the place they go to for christenings, weddings and funerals. They would probably not recognise those things when we grandly refer to them as occasional offices. For them these are the events that bring them into church.

I have a strong memory of a conversation that I had with a non-churchgoing friend while we were still in the church after Bernard and I got married. He was saying how important it was that churches continued to exist to be places where people came to weddings and to funerals. The conversation is memorable because I had had the same conversation with the daughter of a loyal and longstanding member of our congregation at her funeral here the day before. We were commenting on the timing of the two events, that this is what we the church do – ‘be happy with those who are happy, weep with those who weep’.

But should we think that it is sufficient to show consideration and empathy to others? Do we need to support that with explanations as to why we think this is important? After all most of us know people whose behaviour towards others is exemplary but because they are simply 'good people' not because of their faith. And how can we do that in a way that is non-threatening as few people want to be preached at? One of the downsides of online services is that our neighbours no longer see us on our way to or from church. Our current service arrangements have led us thinking about what is important for each of us about church. For some the fellowship afterwards is so vital that they are unwilling to attend when that is absent. For others what matters is being in the building – somewhere where they feel God's presence more closely. For others still it is the sharing of communion with fellow Christians, the symbolic togetherness. Our challenge is to share those thoughts and feelings with others and in a meaningful way. All of us will be challenged in different ways. We may need to take our feet off the bottom and risk a mouthful of seawater.

The uncertainty of the last few months have led many people to rethink aspects of their lives. Things that were taken as given no longer seem to be certain – we are expecting a future with more people working from home, fewer cheap airfares and more online shopping. I had a chat with someone who told me that lockdown had convinced him it was not yet time to retire. We as a church have seen each other less but talked more. And they have been more meaningful conversations as we try to keep in regular contact with everyone. I was very dubious about my ability to have regular conversations with people without a specific objective but relationships have developed through the weeks as we have spoken about illness, bereavements, new babies and the excitement of seeing friends and family again. It has indeed been a case of 'happy with those who are happy, weep with those who weep'.