

Earlier this year, another local preacher, (Tracey Burch) during her sermon, introduced her pet tortoise. So, not to be outdone, I thought I would begin this morning by introducing my pet stone. Here he is, his name is Fred and he's very well behaved. In fact, I have never known him to misbehave. He can even do a couple of tricks. Watch this. "Fred- Stay!" Here's another: "Fred-play dead!" That's about it so far but I'm working on it. I'm going to sit Fred over here just for now because he's going to help in this sermon a bit later.

I am always very aware when I prepare for and preach a sermon that I am just skimming the surface, just taking one tiny dip into what is there and all that we could learn from it and never more so than with this passage today. However, with that in mind, let us turn now to the passage from Matthew's Gospel which Joyce just read for us.

This whole chapter of Matthew's gospel has dealt, in a sense, with the theme of how we live our lives, that what we do with our time and talents matters, as those of you who were worshiping with us last week will have heard Derek remind us of and this follows on from that.

Here we see a picture of Christ the King returning in glory to judge the world. It is an awesome thought, in the true meaning of that word, scary but at the same reassuring. There will be a reckoning; a setting right. God will prevail. Good will prevail. Evil will not win. Jesus the King will return. God's kingdom will come. Suffering and pain will end. Our God holds in his hands the whole of history. He is in charge. And perhaps now more than ever that is something we need to know.

Of course, like all passages in the Bible this needs to be read in the light of the rest of scripture and all that we know about God's love. I want to emphasise this because at first glance it can look as if this is talking about earning salvation or winning God's approval on the basis of what we have or haven't done.

The Bible makes it very clear that we can't earn our way into heaven by being good. It's just not possible. No one except Jesus has ever been good enough or lived a blameless life. Paul reminds us in his letter to the Romans (5 v8) that while we were still sinners Christ died for us, and again in Ephesians (2 v8,9) that it is by grace that we are saved. It is not by works, nothing we have done or could do, there is nothing to boast about but it is the gift of God, available to all.

When our youngest son was very small, about 18 months old, I took him to the swimming pool one day. I turned my back on him for just a moment, while I retrieved my locker key. In that moment he toddled to the edge and jumped in. The deep end! All those things that people say about babies coming back up to the surface and starting to swim didn't seem to apply. He sank like a brick. As I looked on in horror and before I had time to do anything, a lady swimming by saw what had happened, dived down and rescued him. As I carried him to the changing room, he was howling and crying. Was he crying in fear at his brush with death, in distress at what had happened? Oh no! He was crying, "Again! I want to do it again!"

He had absolutely no understanding of the danger he had been in, or what he had been saved from and I wonder sometimes, do we?

Today is the last Sunday before Advent. A time when we begin to think about and prepare for Christmas. To reflect on how God stepped into history, reached out to us in love. Jesus, Immanuel, God with us, was born into poverty in a dark, dirty stable, in to an occupied nation, under threat of death from the moment he was born. He started life as a refugee. Into a cold, dark, dirty stable, into a cold, dark, dirty world, came the saviour, precisely because it was dark and dirty. God sent us a saviour because we **needed** saving and many still do.

In Romans we read all have sinned and fall short of the Glory of God. (3 v23) That is the bad news. The Good news is of course, as we read in 1 Timothy (1 v15), Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners.

We can never really grasp or appreciate the good news unless we understand the bad. And we **need** to grasp it: to let our wonder, our gratitude, our amazement at what God has done for us, change and influence our entire lives. Jesus gave us two very clear instructions earlier in this Gospel. The first is; Love the Lord your God with all your heart and the second is: love your neighbour as yourself. Not to earn our place in heaven or win God's approval but as a response to the God who first loved us. It is a response of gratitude and love **but** it is also an act of witness. A demonstration of God living in us.

And this brings me back to my pet stone. My stone you will recall is very well behaved. It never does anything wrong but equally it never does anything right either. Basically, it just exists. Some time ago I read the words of a Japanese Christian. He was talking about why he became a believer and his words have stuck with me because they struck home. He said, "I read about a man called Jesus who went around doing good. This worried me because so often I am content just to go around."

Perhaps you have seen pictures of the so called three wise monkeys: Hear no evil, see no evil, speak no evil.

Its good advice as far as it goes, but in God's eyes it clearly does not go far enough; the whole of scripture makes that plain.

As followers of Christ we need to add another - **DO** some good. So many religions and philosophies teach that we should not do to others what we would not want done to ourselves. The Bible takes it further. Jesus said "**Do** to others what you would have them do to you." (Matt 7 v12) The difference is subtle but profound. Love your enemies, love your neighbour, give to the poor, care for others. In other words, God says do not show judgement, do not limit your love because I don't.

We serve a God of justice who cares for the poor and the weak. A proactive God, who reaches out to us, with grace and love. And we who have experienced that love are called to show it and share it.

I have never robbed a bank; committed a murder or done anything that the world at large would regard as especially shocking. However, God's standards are far higher than the world's and we see plainly from scripture that he is concerned not just with great evil but the way we live our lives and particularly the way we treat others.

Those who are likened to the goats in this passage are not accused of terrible evil deeds either. They stand accused of thinking only of themselves, like the rich man in the story of Dives and Lazarus or the farmer in the parable who stored up all his crops. Of failing to see or address the needs of those around them. The goats have chosen to be goats. To live selfish lives, disregarding God.

Notice what the righteous in the parable are commended for. It is not bringing an end to world poverty, curing cancer or ridding society of all ills.

It is simply seeing the needs around them and responding, helping others, small acts of kindness.

When I was a child, we used to sing a song: "Jesus bids us shine". If you can remember it then the bad news is, you're probably at least as old as me, if not, google it after this because although it's a children's song it contains some important truths. It reminds us we are there are many kinds of darkness in this world, sin, want and sorrow; and we are called to shine like a light for God. "You in your small corner and I in mine". At the moment for many of us, that corner can seem very small indeed. But there is always good we can do if we look around. In Ephesians 2 v10 we are reminded that we are saved in order to do good works that God has prepared for us to do.

Needs, physical, spiritual and emotional are all around and there is often something we can do. Write a letter, say a prayer, sign a petition, help out financially or practically, write to or call someone to encourage them. It is not about earning our place in heaven or winning God's approval but about responding to and being changed by the love we have experienced.

Notice, too, that the righteous ask "when did we do this?" Have you ever wondered why? Doing good, helping others has become so natural to them that they simply do it without noticing. It's second nature to them.

You know, when a baby is born, often, one of the first things people comment on or want to know is, who does he or she look like? When our eldest son was born, my mother rang with this very question. I looked down at the infant in my arms who was a little yellow on account of being slightly jaundiced and had long skinny arms and said without hesitation, "Kermit the frog." It took her a long time to forgive me for that one...

Of course, he did grow to resemble both me and my husband in all kinds of ways, not just looks but personality and attitude. We all grow to resemble, not just our parents but those we spend time with.

And here is a challenge to us all. I wonder are you a little bit more like Jesus than you were last year, last month, yesterday? Am I?

Jesus calls us as he called the first disciples to follow him. To follow is to do something, to move, to progress, to be heading somewhere. **It is not** about our own efforts, trying really hard. That is why Paul reminded us in Romans (12 v2). not to transform ourselves but to **be** transformed. To allow God by his Holy Spirit to work in us.

Nor is it about never getting it wrong; we are all works in progress and need God's mercy and forgiveness daily. But we are, or should be, in progress, staying where we are is not an option. God loves me just the way I am, that is a wonderful biblical truth, but nothing in the Bible suggests He wants me to stay that way. He wants me to progress, to follow Jesus and grow more like him.

There are so many people out there this morning, washing the car, walking the dog or whatever. People who need to know Jesus. People who need His love. His forgiveness. His salvation. They are as likely to attend a worship service or read the Bible as take a trip to Mars. How are they to experience this love, to meet God, to know the difference He makes, if they do not see it in us; in the people we are, the lives we lead, the difference God makes.

We are not called to be pet stones, but living stones as the writer of 1 Peter(2 v 5)puts it, people who as Derek reminded us last week are ready to put themselves, their talents into God's hands, who are ready and willing to be used by Him, who actively building up His kingdom, that others may see the difference. The **hope** that lives in us; and be drawn to Him and be saved.

And so, to God be all the Glory. Now and throughout eternity. Amen.