

All Saints Talk for Sunday 31st December 2023

New Years Eve Service. Talk by Callum Houston

I wanted to try and wrap up the lessons we have been going over this past year here at All Saints Weston.

Luckily for me the two main sermon series we went through “Journey to the Promised Land” and “Followers of the way” are about two things very central to my own faith - Discipleship (that is to say following Christ where he leads) and Pilgrimage (an outward journey where we achieve inner growth), so I feel somewhat qualified to talk about these two subjects today.

I’ll start things off by focusing on the Biblical themes for those two sermon series I mentioned starting with Journey to the Promised Land. The themes were mostly built around the Israelites forty-year long exodus between leaving Egypt and entering the promised land of Canaan. Of course a season long sermon series spanning multiple books of the Bible can’t be condensed into a single talk, but going to the basics, to the scripture at the core of the series, what is the Bible trying to teach us?

Journey to the Promised Land

Well from our OT reading today we see that the Israelites, despite being promised (and even shown) their future homeland, they weren’t allowed in after they made it clear from their defiance against God that they did not understand **why** this land was being given to them in the first place.

They were greedy and didn’t realise the wider picture of their place in God’s plan to redeem the world. It wasn’t for lack of trying on God’s part either! He spends a good portion of Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus and Deuteronomy trying to get this through to these stubborn people and they just will not take it in, so in the end he resorts to playing hard-ball with them and sends them away from the promised land - to reform them into who they need to be.

The prophets often use the motif of God's people being refined like Gold in a blazing furnace, and here we see it most clearly as the Israelites face countless trials and challenges in the desert, yet from starvation to warfare, whenever they faced challenges in the desert it was never God being mean or vengeful, it was because God would often let them fall victim to their own self destructive ways. In fact he often had to intervene to prevent his people's complete destruction, never fully abandoning them. It's like a parent telling their child off for trying to cross the road without looking at the lights.

It's always down to the Israelites to examine themselves and work on fixing their relationship with God. God is always there reaching down but it is up to us, like the Israelites, to make sure we are always trying to work on growing closer to our saviour - to use our lives to grow in faith, to forge ourselves like gold in the furnace.

The message in those first five books of the Bible we covered in Followers of the Way is mostly about discipleship. They teach us that closeness to God, and a will aligned with his are two of the most essential tools to successfully follow His lead. He is the way to true salvation and if we keep our faithfulness in Him He will clothe us, feed us and keep us.

God's will is for His love to allow us to be our best selves for Him and for others, and sometimes it takes us being pushed out of our comfort zone and challenged a little to get the right perspective on things.

Comfort and routine are good things but they can get us so caught up in the material world that like the Israelites in the desert, we can forget to consider our place in the world and subsequent duties we have as Children of God. We are taught to make sure we condition ourselves to be receptive to the Lord, instead *of* expectant of Him.

Followers of the Way

Next up, later this year was Followers of the Way, where we went through (explain a little about the book). This book focuses on our calling to discipleship as inspired by ancient Christian practices, chief amongst them being pilgrimage.

Pilgrimage might invoke images of long hiking adventures like the Camino de Santiago or the Via Dolorosa, but in reality a pilgrimage is anywhere where we can get away from the world and grow closer to God. This can be something as simple as when we are in the gym or out walking the dog.

Even though there are easier ways to go on spiritual pilgrimage, I do highly recommend (if possible) going on an actual pilgrimage and the longer the better - because it allows you to be alone longer with God and creation, learning to grow closer to him every step of the way.

Even though the destination of pilgrimage is an important part, the spiritual growth happens along the journey, preparing you along the way (like the Israelites in the desert) so that when you arrive where you are going you are holier than when you set off and in a far better position to love God and appreciate the surroundings. I often go on day-long wild camps to connect with Christ in nature, often I aim for a church somewhere out in the countryside and trek there and back over the course of a day or two - with next to no cell reception and with a Bible to accompany me. Yes, I'm that creepy person you see in the woods at night...

But I really recommend going to a Christian retreat (which I'm sure we could help provide info on *check with Emma first*) once a year to really refresh your connection with Jesus, to catch up like old friends.

The book, like myself, takes lots of inspiration from the ancient 'Celtic saints' of Great Britain and Ireland from the 4th to 7th centuries. Saints like St. Patrick and St. Cuthbert who were early pioneers of using an extremely simple lifestyle and regular pilgrimage through nature to be ever nearer with God.

Many Celtic saints, like St. Patrick and St. Cuthbert were wondering aesthetics who regarded closeness with nature and closeness to God to be achieved the same way (as to live harmoniously with the Creation is a good way to understand the Creations Creator) Reference followers of the way book here - These celtic saints are often associated with nature (a bit like Radagast the Brown, for any LOTR fans) because they would often travel from town to town living only off what they could carry on their back, usually relying on the goodwill of strangers for food and water. They lived in a state of essentially constant pilgrimage where along their travels they would preach, pray constantly (either while walking from town to town or at hilltops over villages they were to enter or had just left), and meditate on the meaning of life and nature in relation to God.

Like in our NT reading, these men who evangelised ancient Britain which the book calls us to learn from were men and women who were willing to drop everything in order to respond to that call of 'Follow me' wherever it led. Some of these saints had comfy lives in Rome and France which they could have lived while still working their way through the ranks of the church. There was no (practical) reason for these people to lay their lives on the line, dodging druids and slavers just to convert a few villages and towns nobody had ever heard of before, in what was literally considered to be the edge of the world at the time.

No reason I should say, less than the love of God. A love so deep and profound that it flowed through these men and called them to save the souls of these distant pagans - Thats the amazing thing about God's love, it makes us love others more fully through Him.

It might sound cliché, but after reading *Followers of the Way*, it seems that the main lesson of the book is that love, and more specifically loving God properly (as a disciple) and living by his teachings is the key to fixing the sicknesses in our world. If we loved each other as God intended there would be no war, no loneliness and no class, if we loved nature as He intended us to we would live in harmony with it, there would be no food shortages, no mass extinctions. It seems that the most fundamental thing we are made for, to love our creator, really is the deceptively simple cure to all of the world's problems.

Discipleship

This journey to be disciples of our Lord Jesus Christ, that is, to be Christian, is like the lifelong pilgrimages of those Celtic saints. We are called not just to have faith, but to live by our faith, following His example in everything we say, do and are, so that his love can be spread everywhere we go like a light in the dark.

And luckily for us, as Christians we not only have the teachings of Christ and his earliest followers in the NT but also have the entire OT at our disposal (which when interpreted through Christ, becomes a cohesive guide to both the Human soul and the nature of God and our relationship with Him), something (as simple as having our own Bible) would have been a mind blowing luxury for most Christians throughout history, so it's not like we're short for homework! - A good Bible study technique mentioned in the book is (reference book) What is discipleship?

Many of us can be put off by terms like discipleship as it can make it seem like we aren't good enough Christians because we might not be living as Christ centric a life as we can, or we might compare ourselves to other Christians and their faith (despite the fact we all have our own equally important, unique journey with God).

Of course the goal for any Christian is to always have our hearts and minds set on Christ and His divine teaching, but remember that God is always playing the

long game with us and understands that we all have our own paths to Him. While Christ may be the only Way to the Father, that way can involve very different paths for different people. Sometimes it's a nice easy straightforward path, and for others it can be a windy complicated path with lots of trials (like the Israelites in the desert). As long as your intention is to follow God, as long as your heart is in the right place, God will give you his gift of grace so you will always be heading in the right direction and growing in faith.

Christ also gave us His Parakletos (literally lawyer, advocate, helper) to guide us through the twists and turns of our journey with Him. If life is a Pilgrimage with Christ as our path (as well as our destination), then His spirit is our compass.

Luckily here in Weston we are in one of the best places to grow as disciples. We have an amazing community, wonderful staff and clergy who truly live to serve their flock, and so so many opportunities to help out.

Weston and integrating lessons

We have programmes like the Hub which we organise with the Genesis Trust, we have various youth outreach programmes which have been growing loads over the past few months (shoutout to Ben). We have an Alpha course starting soon, and these are just some of the many resources we can provide you with on your journey with God... Langridge and N.Stoke could do with some extra hands on deck too ;)

Not only do we have ASW and all of the resources we can help provide you with, but we are also surrounded by beautiful green hills on all sides crisscrossed by beautiful footpaths with world-class views - which are as much a testament to God's creation (his gift) for us as any Cathedral. These hills are also dotted with ancient parish churches where you can really feel God in the stillness of their ancient stone walls.

Just as it was in the time of St.Alphage (who was from Weston), Weston is like a greenhouse for Christians wanting to grow in faith.

What are some other practical ways I could live a more Christ centric life? Well in the book (followers of the way, honestly it is a great book, I see why Tom likes it) they actually break things down into very easily digestible chunks, but some which stand out to me for both their simplicity in practice and profundity in learning are:

-Tithing/giving - Why this is good

-Journeying with a Friend - How watching somebody else's faith journey can help give your own more context

-Pilgrimage - Of any form, but especially a getaway

For any help with these points and integrating them into your life, please ask us here, that's what we are here for, to help you grow!

Year Recap

Speaking of growth... (talk about how this has been a year of growth - culminating for me in this preach! - and how next year will be the same). We are all in different places with our faith but journey together. I look forward to seeing how far we have come in our faith next year (talk about how much some of the youth have grown, becoming mini apologists).

This year has been such an extraordinary year for me personally but also for us as a parish and community.

We've got to know Tom and Mims so well through their various garden parties and BBQ's, we've seen the Rock project kick off properly with the first stages taking place right now up the road as we speak, We've had the wonderful Emma join us! Some of us got to go on pilgrimage to Lourdes, our youth programmes have also nearly doubled and last week we even got to close down the whole High Street so that Weston could sing the Lord's praises!!

As Humans we are fated to travel through time in a linear way which can make our years seem very long and static, but at times like New Year's eve we can

take a step back and appreciate how far we have all come with a wider perspective. Which is closer to how God sees things.

Congregation

I also want to say how amazing it is to see all of you choosing to be here today, choosing to start your last day of the year off with church when you could have very easily justified not coming and having a well earned lie on this busiest of days. By coming you have not only kept the Lord's day holy (which he commanded us to do all the way back in Exodus) but you are also the reason not only for our local Christian community's thriving, but also for the continuation of the Christian movement as a whole as you help carry some of the weight of this this 2,000 year old yoke given to us by Jesus.

Don't feel like the things we have achieved over this last year happened apart from you, all our achievements and growth we have done together. We thrive and grow because of you, not in spite of you.

Like I said before, I'm genuinely excited to see where we will be as a church and as individuals over the next year and I want to thank each of you for being a part of things. Even something as seemingly mundane as showing up for church on Sunday mornings means that we get enough people to attend to continue with regular services, but you coming here today means you are in part responsible for keeping these doors open, for bringing the light of creation to this little corner of Somerset.

God makes us all a part of something bigger.

Amen.