

Sunday 3<sup>rd</sup> September

Jeremiah 15:15-21

Romans 12:9-end

Matthew 16:21-end

### **So what?**

So what?

So what difference does the Christian faith make – for our own lives and for the world around us? Does the Christian faith make the world a better place? Does it make us better people?

We look around us at the world and see a mess. War in Ukraine for example – news every day of more violence and destruction. Each act of violence affecting people like you and me. Across the world people fleeing for their lives. Refugees, asylum seekers, men, women and children longing for new lives free from fear and persecution. People like you and me in small boats, tossed around by the wind and the waves. And here in Shirley and Birmingham we see homeless people on the streets, we know of families who can't afford the basics of life; people like you and me dependent on handouts and charities.

Just what has gone wrong?

And its not just other people. Its not just the systems and policies that make the world go round that are not functioning healthily. Its us too. I am sure we all find ourselves getting sucked into the ways of the world, the way things are done all around us.

You ask someone to do some work in your home. They tell you that if you pay cash there will be no VAT and its all too easy to say yes. You take your 15 year old grandchild to a football match and are tempted to say that are under 14 so they get in for half price. You know what you should do, but its easier and simpler (and perhaps more immediately rewarding) to do the other.

Our NT reading today is from Paul's letter to the Romans. If there were anywhere in the New Testament that gave an overview of what the life, death and resurrection of Jesus means for us and the world then Romans is that place. It is here in the opening chapters of Romans that Paul talks about what he believes, what the Christian faith means to him. It is here that Paul talks about sin – we have all fallen

short of God's glory. It is here that he tells of forgiveness which is ours – and for everyone – through the death of Jesus and by the grace of God - an undeserved free gift from God. And it is here that he uses some beautiful words to tell us that nothing in the whole of creation can separate us from the love of God. All wonderful stuff – but it begs the question we started with. So what? What difference did it make for Paul? What difference did it make to those Christians in Rome he was writing to? What difference does it make for us and the world today?

And the short section from Romans we had as our New Testament reading this morning begins to answer that question. It follows on from the verses at the beginning of chapter 12 which say – *Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your minds.* The 'so what' is that what Jesus has done and continues to do in us and through us brings about a transformation in who we are and in how we live. The 'so what' is that it doesn't have to be like this. We can and should make a difference. The 'so what' is that God can and will change us. Transform us.

And in what we heard this morning from Romans we can begin to imagine a different kind of world. *Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honour. Do not lag in zeal, be ardent in spirit, serve the Lord. Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer. Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers.*

In Bibles these verses are often entitled 'marks of a true Christian'. Would that they were marks of our lives. Would that the 'so what' was actually evident in our lives and the life of the world around us.

So how can it be?

One thing's for sure – it won't come simply by just trying harder. I am sure we all know that from our own experience

It will come, however, through the transformation Paul talks about in that verse I quoted earlier. *Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your minds.*

This is transformation brought about by the love of God poured into our hearts and lives. A transformation that does not just change the way we are inside but also changes the way we think and the way we live. A transformation that affects the world around us. But a transformation that is an ongoing process.

This morning you were, I hope, given a leaflet 'Deeper Roots'. This talks about how we can each develop our faith so that its roots go down deeper, so that it becomes a faith that make us stronger and better able to live the kinds of lives that answer that 'so what' question. If you didn't get a leaflet, pick one up from the back! If you are watching online there are some in St James and will be some in the other churches next week.

To help us, over the next few weeks and months we will be thinking about prayer – prayer which is not just asking God for things, but deepening our relationship with him, enabling us to grow in our understanding and in the application of our faith. Enabling us to live the kinds of lives that Paul talks about. Enabling us to answer the 'so what' question.

We will be looking in particular in our sermons in October at the Lord's Prayer – the pattern of prayer that Jesus himself gave us - and seeing how praying in that way can help transform us. We will be thinking about more regular prayer – perhaps setting aside 5 or 10 minutes (maybe more) each day on a regular basis. A Parish prayer book (to which you can contribute) will give us some ideas and suggestions as to how to do this. And we will be thinking too about other forms of prayer. We aren't all 'wordy' people. Maybe we relate to God better through music, art, crafts – whatever. There will be a day in November when we will be able to try different ways of praying, of communicating and spending time with God. Ways which will help us deepen our roots.

We are also introducing what we have called Pilgrim Partners. As I mention in the leaflet, members of our ministry team have been meeting in pairs over the last few months to encourage and support and sometimes challenge each other. We have all benefited from this, in terms of recognising what God is doing and what he is calling us to do. We have all grown in our faith. We are inviting you – anyone in our congregations – to join us. To meet with one other person every month or so for support and encouragement in our walks with God – our pilgrimages if you like. To help our roots go deeper.

Growing in our faith in such ways is part of this transformation process Paul talks about which will help us in the way we live, in the ways we bring change to the world around us. To make that difference that answers the 'so what' question.

In our gospel reading today Jesus calls us to deny ourselves, take up our cross and follow him. He talks of the temptation before us to gain the world but lose our life. I think he is really saying the same thing as we have just picked up from Romans. If we conform to the world around us, if we allow the world to squeeze us into its mould (as one translation has it) then we will find ourselves disconnected from him. But by taking up our cross, by being transformed, by entering into this life giving and

life enhancing relationship with him we will be those who change not only themselves but also go on to change the world.

This is surely what faith is about. Its about changing our lives so that we can help change the world around us. Its about demonstrating the love of God by who we are, by what we say and by what we do. Its about us being the difference we long to see in the world