**Second Sunday after Trinity – Jeremiah 20: 7-13; Romans 6: 1b-11; Matthew 10: 24-39**

Here we are at the 14th Sunday since we went into “lock down” due to the pandemic. We have been forced into a new way of living by being isolated and low-spirited for some fourteen weeks because we have not seen our loved ones or got used to this new way of life. In the Jeremiah reading the opposition and isolation that Jesus’ followers experienced in the name of their Lord was nothing new. Some six hundred years earlier, the prophecy of Jeremiah expresses just such feelings of isolation, even despair, in the heart of a man who felt compelled to speak out in the name of God but who was rejected by his because of his harsh message.

The features of this intensely vivid meditation are threefold. First, there is the imperative to serve, closely intertwined with the cost of such service. The two go hand in hand, and it is impossible to obey the first without experiencing the second; but to those who are truly called by God, it is equally impossible to avoid the second by disobeying the first. Also the cost, like the call, is extremely personal, and can involve the loss not only of possessions but also of friends, self-esteem and dignity. The third element is the assurance that, despite all the heartbreak of those who are called by the Lord to serve will be vindicated by divine power, and those who opposed them will be brought down. This, the fundamental truth, is what makes it possible to carry on.

Black people have suffered at the hands of the police both here and abroad. We have seen the pictures of police brutality that led to the death of George Floyd. Black people have been held back from promotions in the workplace including the Church. There is a movement “Black lives matter” who are robustly canvassing for a juster society where all people will be treated with fairness and dignity in spite of their ethnicity, gender and sexuality. We see black and white come together under this umbrella demanding change. The family of George Floyd have behaved with dignity and have a sense of forgiveness to live according to the Lord’s commands “forgiving others their trespasses as God has forgiven us”. We also saw pictures of a black man carrying a white man who was possibly a counter protester – out of danger because it was “the right thing to do” – a strength of character.

In Romans 6, Paul deals with a misconception about the nature of the gospel, namely that the free availability of forgiveness either engenders a lack of moral responsibility or demands an abundance of sin in order to be shown to its best effect. However, this is certainly not the case; the whole point of the forgiveness available through the death and resurrection of Christ is to allow sin to be eliminated, not multiplied. God’s grace in Christ is not a licence to sin but means of making and keeping the faithful free from sin, and the notion that the best way to experience God’s grace is to continue in sin amounts to nothing more than the kind of legalism that the grace is intended to do away with. God’s grace is just that, gracious, and cannot be manipulated by those who think that it will automatically be shown to them whenever they sin. In any case, those who are truly united with Christ will be unable to continue in sin in this fashion, because through his death, sin’s hold over them has been broken, and with his resurrection have been renewed to live life as God intended.

Those who think that they are in for an enthusiastic reception when they preach the gospel need to be realistic. They can expect no better reception than Christ himself received which was certainly not always positive. But fear of opposition on a human level is no reason to give up, because behind the message there is a greater reality than the merely human reality, and that greater reality remains constant, no matter what happens on the human level.

The priest who was recently told by e-mail, that the curacy placement he had requested at a particular C of E Church was unsuccessful, “despite his obvious gifts” he “might feel uncomfortable” at the parish because of the predominantly white working class congregation, continues to remain faithful to his calling. Despite his criticisms of the Church, for its approach in tackling racism, he reserved praise for Bishop Sarah as he believes she is trying to listen, learn and lead the Church in a way proclaiming the idea of a multicultural kingdom, as the Christian scripture states. We at the Holy Innocents are embracing this multicultural kingdom in that we have had and continue to have black leaders in our church; in its history there have been some seven church wardens and now a black priest but there need to be a continuance of encouraging and developing one another in being part of the leadership in our church.

The divine reality behind the message acts as a double encouragement to be faithful, because not only does it express itself in care for those who are faithful, it will bring retribution on those who deny it. In fact the reality is such that it must take precedence over all other commitments, and even the natural ties of blood and family which, under normal circumstances, are so pressing must be subordinated to it. The relationship and duty, to Christ have priority over every other relationship and duty, and are to be expressed in embracing the way of hardship, even of death, which Jesus embraced, in the knowledge that this is the only way of proving and experiencing that ultimate divine reality – life.

There is much value today placed on self-confidence and self-assurance, in an effort to help people become their true selves without being so vulnerable to abuse or pressure from others. Self-assertiveness is the quality to prize, and any deliberate giving-up of one’s rights is viewed with suspicion and often considered weak and wrong.

Jesus’ answer has been experienced and found to be true by many people in each generation. Just as the result of Jesus’ total self-giving in death was new resurrection life, so the result of us giving up our natural self-centredness is a new sense of life in which we find we are more free to be ourselves than if we had slaved over it. It is the answer a God who loves and cherishes us.