

“Battles and blessings on the Way”

A sermon preached by the Revd Canon John Barr in Great Malvern Priory

Bible Readings: Daniel 6. 6 - 23 Mark 15. 46 - 16. 8

Second Sunday of Easter 23 April 2017 6.30 pm Evensong

May I speak in the Name and to the glory of the Living God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

I wonder if you've heard the story about a departing vicar who left three envelopes for his successor to open, should they ever face a problem that they didn't think they could solve? At the first major crisis, the new vicar opens the first envelope to read the message 'Blame your predecessor'. Not too long afterwards, at the next crunch point, the vicar opens the second envelope and reads this word of advice 'Restructure'. Eventually a fresh set of difficulties leads the by now not so new vicar to resort to opening the third envelope. There the vicar is met with this instruction 'Prepare three envelopes!' And no, Mary and I didn't receive three envelopes from Julian when we arrived over nineteen years ago, and we won't be leaving any either! At this stage, I'd also better issue a disclaimer - when we were considering music for this month, neither Piers nor I spotted any connection between the first line of the choir anthem - 'The strife is o'er' - and my farewell service!

Yet all of us know what it is to face major challenges, or strife, as we journey through life. And today, on what is also celebrated as St George 's Day, we remember someone whose Christian faith was certainly stretched by all that he had to contend with. His example reminds us how the Christian life involves battles as well as blessings, and that you and I should not be surprised by the challenges and obstacles that we have to face on life's journey. Reflecting on his own experience of following Jesus for more than forty years, Nicky Gumbel, Vicar of Holy Trinity Brompton, describes the battles he has had to face in these words: "There have been internal battles - times of intense temptation, doubt, fear and anxiety. There have been times of deep sadness, great loss and bereavement. There have been battles over health, sleep, finances, work and relationships. There have been periods of great opposition and criticism". I can certainly identify with that, and doubtless you can too. Following Jesus does involve faith stretching battles, as well as great blessings. Perhaps we shouldn't be surprised for, as someone once pointed out, the letters of the word faith could stand for the acronymn Fantastic Adventure In Trusting Him. Yet as we respond to the Lord's call, and open our lives to Him day by day, then He will lead us through the battles and the fear that so often holds us back, to the blessing of a life of deeper and more joyful faith in Him.

Fear is one battle that many of us have to face. It can certainly be crippling, and a real challenge to faith. Fear confronts each of us at some time or other in our lives. It may be a particular phobia – in the Barr household our phobias include spiders, heights and enclosed spaces. Or else it may be a long term deep rooted anxiety, whether about our health or future, about the wellbeing of a loved one, or the prospect of death. Whatever the cause, such fear can overshadow our life, and challenge our faith.

Both of this evening's Bible readings invite us to reflect on the experience of others who also knew what it was to be really afraid. Facing different life and death situations, both Daniel and the disciples of Jesus found their faith tested to the very limit. In the story of Daniel, we are told of how a person of real integrity was challenged to compromise his faith, in order to avoid being thrown into the lions' den. If Daniel took the easy way out, and joined everyone else in obeying the royal decree, then his enemies would find no charges to bring against him. However Daniel was not prepared to collude with such brazen idolatry, whatever the personal cost. He

continued to turn to God in daily prayer, was then caught doing so, and ended up in the lions' den.

I wonder how might Daniel have felt as he was shut in the lion's den, entombed with ferocious creatures who would normally eye him up as their next tasty main course? We're not told, but it seems most unlikely that Daniel would have felt completely calm, cool, and collected, when the stone was finally rolled across the entrance! Perhaps he even found himself wondering whether he'd got it all wrong, or if God was still there with him, as death stood staring him in the face? But God was there, and Daniel was wonderfully delivered from death, his faith in God being fully vindicated. And his trust in God also proved to be a powerful witness to others, including king Darius.

God was also there with those first fearful and grief-stricken followers of Jesus. For them, the light of faith must have seemed to be extinguished by what had happened to Jesus. They had watched Him die in agony on a Roman cross, and then seen Him buried in a stone cold tomb. And all their hopes and dreams lay buried with Him. Or so they thought. Then, on that first Easter morning, we're told how the women who went to the tomb were confronted by an earth-shattering turn of events: an open and empty tomb; and an incredible message to take in – "He has been raised; he is not here" (Mark 16. 6). No wonder they "fled from the tomb, for terror and amazement had seized them; and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid" (Mark 16. 8). What on earth was going on?

"Do not be alarmed; you are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has been raised" (Mark 16. 6). Slowly, as the light of Easter dawned upon them, the disciples found the flickering flame of their faith and hope being rekindled. As they met the Risen Lord, and saw that He was indeed gloriously alive, so their fear gave way to a deeper and more joyful trust. And the flame of faith came to blaze anew with the Spirit kindled fire of Pentecost.

From faith, through fear and doubt, to deeper faith. That was the experience of the first followers of Jesus, as they discovered more of what it was to travel in His company. And it is the same today. For you and I are also invited to journey with Jesus, to follow where He leads, and to allow the Risen Lord to strengthen our faith and confound our fear. Yes, the journey may be difficult. The obstacles facing us may seem immense, and fear may often overshadow us. Yet as we commit ourselves to follow Jesus day by day, and allow His Spirit to work within us, so we shall come to know more of the Lord's love, joy, and peace in our hearts and lives - whatever our circumstances. And we shall also discover more of how the good news of Easter – of all that God has done for us by the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ - has the power to transform our lives and to enable us to share in Christ's victory over sin and death.

As the Barr family moves on from Malvern, we do so with deep gratitude to God for the life of this Priory fellowship, and for all that you have come to mean to us as a family over the past nineteen and a half years. You will always have a special and unique place in our hearts and lives, and we shall continue to hold you in our prayers from afar. In the changes that lie ahead - both for you here, and for us over in Leicestershire - may all of us remember that the main thing is to keep the main thing the main thing. In other words, may we keep our eyes fixed on Jesus who is - as the writer to the Hebrews puts it - "the pioneer and perfecter of our faith" (Hebrews 12.2). For it is the Living Lord who calls us to the greatest adventure of all - that of sharing life's journey together with Him, in the power of His risen life. It is a journey of battles and blessings, but its final destination is more wonderful and glorious than you and I can possibly imagine. So - in Marje's memorable words - 'Alleluia! On we go!'

John Barr