

Address by David James for the Third Sunday after Trinity

Good morning. I hope today finds you in good shape and not too knocked about by the lockdown that we have all been living through since I last spoke to you.

It's been an unprecedented and testing time and almost every one of us has had to find a new way of going about our daily lives. What changes have you had to make, I wonder? Has it been difficult or relatively straightforward for you?

Part of me has quite enjoyed the chance to sit and read without the usual punctuation of having to go somewhere or arrange something or another. I've realised on reflection that all the books I have been enjoying have been in some way or another about people's lives and how they reveal character, and the ability to deal with the unexpected, difficult or even dangerous situations.

So when I read today's gospel one little sentence stood out for me, when Jesus says, 'Whoever welcomes you welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me.' St Paul puts it another way; he says, quite simply, 'we are ambassadors for Christ (2 Cor. 5.20).'

The idea is simply that how we live, the kind of people we are, the convictions that shape our thoughts and actions proclaim - or betray - the one whom we represent in the world. Are we faithful ambassadors or do we betray the one we represent?

That's one of the reasons Paul is labouring so hard to explain to the Roman Christians in today's epistle what should shape their lives. We are about life, not death, he says. Sin leads to death but Christ is the source of our life. So speak and act accordingly.

Sometimes there are things that happen to us that knock us out of shape and it's unsettling and disorientating. Most often they are quite personal things - from a

significant failure to achieve an ambition or goal of some kind to the sudden loss of a job, or a person, or one's health. In that way the Coronavirus pandemic has been unusual because it has hit virtually all of us at once, and at a stroke everything has altered. It's been a national, even international, distortion of everyday life. We've all been knocked out of shape.

At such times faith can hold us together and help re-shape us. It gives a framework for trying to understand what's happening to us and to the world. And so it helps us to know how to respond to it. Talking with other Christians about how to do that is an important way of growing in our own understanding of faith and helps us in a key task as Christians.

That's because the job of the Church is, I believe, to help people to find and to shape their life through faith in Jesus. He is, after all, the ultimate ambassador, as that sentence from today's gospel says. He comes from the Father and he and the Father are so completely identified with each other that they are in fact one. To have seen Jesus is to have seen the Father.

In our own time and in our own way we have to give our lives a Christ-like shape. If we can live in hope and not lose heart when things are difficult, then we can be a ray of hope and a source of encouragement to others.

Like Sir John Birch, for example, whose obituary I came across the other day. He became ambassador to Hungary in the late 1980s when communism was falling apart. He had to deal with Hungarian politicians and bureaucrats whose lives were disintegrating. All they had known as a way of life for decades was collapsing around them.

Birch didn't crow or belittle them but offered them a sympathetic ear and made them feel listened to. It secured their trust and their co-operation. He helped move them towards a new relationship with the rest of Europe and encouraged links with the EU. His policy derived from his character.

Years later, on that fateful day 9/11, he and a group of journalists were in Tirana, capital of Albania.

All of a sudden, as a result of the Twin Towers disaster, they found their flights were cancelled and their credit cards didn't work. The journalists began to panic and there was talk of hiring a speedboat to Italy. Nobody was sure how to pay for that, let alone for dinner that evening. At this point Birch calmly produced a heavy envelope from his pocket, stuffed with cash. 'In my day,' he said, 'ambassadors always made contingencies.'

Birch was shaped by his experience, like all of us, but also by his faith. He was brought up as a Quaker and it had a lasting effect on how he lived his life and the kind of person he was.

When our lives are knocked out of shape we are glad of those who can reassure us and show us new possibilities for living a meaningful life again. I think that is always part of our role as Christians and perhaps particularly so now.

'In this world,' said Jesus, 'you will have tribulation. But be of good courage, I have overcome the world.'