

Address for 17 October by Nigel Guthrie (preached at St Michael's)

I'd like to start with some words that come immediately before the passage from Hebrews that we heard this morning, words from the end of chapter 4:

'Since, then, we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold fast to our confession. For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who in every respect has been tested as we are, yet without sin. Let us therefore approach the throne of grace with boldness, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.'

Generally in life we like to look up to people who are admirable, people who treat others well, and excel at what they do. And when we are young we are particularly drawn to look up to those who show the characteristics which we most admire. They provide inspiration for us and we can learn much from them. But our tendency to look for a heroes also has its limitations. As we go through life often our image of such people gets tarnished, sometimes very badly tarnished.

This is hardly surprising as we all make mistakes. We are part of fallen humanity and our life is, on one level, a daily struggle against that. But as Christian people we know that we can and should confess our failings and that we are assured of God's forgiveness. And that is because there is one person who was not corrupted by the world. Jesus is not like the rest of us. As the Letter to the Hebrews tells us, Jesus was tested as we are; Jesus suffered as we do; but he was not corrupted. Instead, he was made perfect through suffering. The extraordinary letter to the Hebrews outlines for us exactly why it is Jesus and only Jesus who can bring eternal salvation to us. Jesus was the Son of the Most High God, and yet he was in no way protected from the hardships of this world. So he is able to sympathise with us, to understand our weaknesses, our feelings of failure and despair and our sheer ignorance. Jesus alone fully carries our humanity as well as carrying all the fullness of God, so that in his dying and rising he brings us the full assurance of forgiveness, opens the gates of heaven for us and in due course leads us through into the unveiled presence of God. This is the glorious picture painted in the Letter to the Hebrews for us.

Meanwhile continue in strange times. In some ways this autumn it feels as if life is beginning to return to normal and we are very grateful for that. But if you talk to anyone working in the NHS and to many people in other walks of life, you will know

that the effects of the pandemic are very much with us. Many leaders are feeling worn down. Many people are fearful about the rising cost of living. And we only have to look at the large numbers of people still being infected with Covid to realise that we have not yet left this worldwide pandemic behind.

And like many bodies the Church of England is trying, and struggling to find its way forward during this unprecedented time. Our own Diocese of Exeter is tackling this under the heading of 'Next Steps' and it is within that context that the Archdeacon of Exeter will be coming to visit our parish on Saturday, the 6th of November. The meeting will take place here in Saint Michaels Church for the whole parish at between 10 am and 12 noon. Do please make every effort to attend and be ready to listen but also to express what you value most here at Saint Michaels Church. The Diocese of Exeter is currently running at a loss of around £1 million a year and that is clearly not sustainable. But the Diocese does not want to close churches, indeed it doesn't save money by closing churches. But together we do need to discern the best ways in which resources should be used – particularly the resource of the stipendiary clergy. We are told that each stipendiary now costs £65,000 a year to employ and support. Just in case you're wondering we're not paid £65,000! The stipend is £26,000 the rest includes pensions and a share of diocesan support costs. But a quick sum shows that we would need to lose 15 clergy to make up the current deficit. So difficult decisions will have to be made.

But that isn't the greatest challenge for the Church of England. The greatest challenge lies in our local churches. This week at our St Michael's committee we learnt that our church secretary and treasurer are both going to be standing down in the coming months. We are most grateful to Vivien and to Paula for the outstanding jobs they have done for us in recent years. And we all realise that these none of these jobs should be a life sentence! But their departure means that we need to address the future of our church committee and we agreed to call a short congregational meeting on Sunday 21 November after Mass to discuss this and share our thoughts. So do please put that date in your diary too and keep this matter in your prayers because without the work and commitment of our church officers we can't function. Is this something that you might be able to help with, even as a job share?

Jesus came to share in the glory of heaven having first gone through the desolation of the betrayal, suffering and death. And he told his followers that they would have

to take up their cross to follow him. But the writer to the Hebrews encourages us to approach the throne of grace with boldness because of Jesus who has gone before us and in the knowledge that we are surrounded by the company of a whole cloud of witnesses. So, as we receive the body and blood of Christ today, in the form of the bread of the altar let us be assured of the loving presence of Christ with us so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.