

11.00am Trinity 20 14.10.18

Saint Anthony of Egypt was a young man but already both his parents had died, and he was left caring for his younger sister. It's the middle of the 3<sup>rd</sup> century in Lower Egypt. Young Anthony wanders into church one Sunday and hears the same Gospel we have heard today.

Anthony's reaction was as clear as the Gospel passage itself. He went and did it. He sold his parents' land, gave the proceeds to the poor, put his sister in the care of some holy virgins – the precursor to the convents that would emerge over the next few hundred years – and he himself went out into the desert seeking God.

Just like that. He spent his life seeking Christ, in a simple life of work and prayer, solitude and silence. A hermit alone for years at a time, and at other times an encouraging father to the new communities that were beginning to develop as the first Christian monasteries grew up.

If you are sitting here today and thinking: 'Yes, that's it. I have just got to go! 'What must I do to inherit eternal life?' To really live? I must 'sell everything [I] have and give to the poor. Then [I must go and], follow [Him].' In the footsteps of St Anthony, if that is what you are hearing then do come and talk to Fr Stephen or I after the Eucharist. You are not alone – the Anglican Society of St Francis, dozens of Church of England Monasteries and Religious Communities are full of people who are seeking just that path – it may be what you are being called to. And if it is, then nothing else will fulfil you.

On the other hand, you may have heard this passage before and already built up a whole armory of theological and moral responses to make sense of this challenge. Why Jesus' call to radical poverty is actually not what it sounds, or why it doesn't apply to **me** in this way or that.

That instinctively and to my shame is so often what I find my subconscious doing when I hear or read Gospel challenges like this.

You may already tithe 10% of your income, with a good degree going to the Church and the rest to other charities. And when you get a windfall – from an investment or a gift – you may always give 20% as a thanks offering to God. Those kind of figures have certainly helped me to have what I hope is a healthy relationship with money. I commend them to you too.

But even then: perhaps I am explaining why I'm *dodging* this bullet.

How can we respond to Jesus' teaching in a way that doesn't dodge the bullet? So often we miss the point because in the face of a challenge from our Lord and

Saviour we desperately try to tidy Him up. Put Him back in that box that we keep Him in. A box made of cultural mores, social acceptability, love: yes, loyalty: yes, but not very much in the way of inconvenience.

Perhaps if we are honest with ourselves, that is our mistake.

I am not going to tell you what to think in response to today's challenging words from the Saviour one way or another. But I do want to suggest that together we be disturbed by them.

This morning I want to advocate for a relationship with Christ that is loving, and fulfilling and strengthening – but also has the ability to provoke, unsettle and move us. Jesus, after all, is not our pet but the Lord of all. The Pantocrator – as mysterious and great, as He is loving and tender [see the apse].

We gather as the Lord's people, on the Lord's day, to share the Word of the Lord and to receive the Lord Himself in Holy Communion. Each and every time we do this we are changed. We are being transformed. And some of this is not exactly comfortable. Jesus talks about us as the branches of His vine, being pruned by the Father – the vinedresser. (St John 15.5). So let us be pruned this week, submitting ourselves neither to the 'cuddly toy God' we have imagined for ourselves, nor – and this is important – nor, the 'grumpy old man God' we might have in the back of our mind too. But let us be pruned instead by the true God and Father of all – holy, mysterious and glorious. So much of life is again and again, being invited to trade the pictures of God we have made for *ourselves* for glimpses of the real thing.

Today's section of St Mark's Gospel falls in amongst the larger context of Jesus sending out His followers with the urgent mission of proclaiming His Kingdom of love and justice and life in all its fullness. This mission is no less urgent today, and it is ours to do. This passage about wealth, then, is Jesus saying do not allow anything, anything to get in the way of the proclamation of the Good News. Nothing is more urgent.

Am I too busy cultivating a comfortable life? Too preoccupied with houses, pensions, career, reputation. Equally it could be negative distractions that are stopping us proclaim the Good News. Am I too preoccupied by the cultivation of fear, worry, to busy doing myself down?

St Mark has Jesus saying, in effect, 'let nothing get in the way of your life in me and your proclamation of the Gospel'.

This week we are encouraged to allow ourselves to be pruned by Christ. Let Him pick out the dead branches and all that is making us slow to respond to the call of His Kingdom. It may not always be comfortable, but we are safe in the knowledge not only that nothing is more important than what He has called us to do, but also that no one can love us more than He does.