

12th after Trinity

It's the end of the holidays for most of us here – we are back to work, back to school, or perhaps off to university or on a gap year.. or the permanent gap year of retirement! The suspension of normal which we experience when we are on holiday is over – no more sitting peacefully by the sea with a book, living it up in the cafes and restaurants of somewhere sunny, sightseeing, visiting exhibitions or stargazing. Life is back to normal. We need to get on with living day to day.

For most of us here, normal life is orderly, shaped by routines, whether they are about preparing lectures, designing or constructing buildings, resolving people's problems, baking or sitting with friends who are lonely.

But for many people in our world at present, life is very far from normal.

For the people of Bangladesh and northern India, Sierra Leone and the people of much of the state of Texas, floods have turned their lives upside down. For many people in Asia, floods have destroyed their livelihoods and their homes - 1,200 people have died and millions are displaced. In Sierra Leone too, floods and mudslides have killed at least 500 people, leaving many more homeless and wrecking what were already very basic water and sanitation systems. In Texas, deaths are around 40 in number, and around 100,000 being looked after in rest centres.

After North Korea fired an intercontinental ballistic missile over Japan earlier this week, with people being told to take cover, UN sanctions have been ramped up and President Trump has said "all options are on the table". Just what this means is unclear – but for people within the range of these huge and powerful missiles, and anxious in case one might be launched with a nuclear warhead, life is far from normal.

And we have seen across the world plenty of examples of the hurtful rhetoric and violent actions of those who are fearful of others around them whose lives or values or aspirations are different to their own... Life recently in Charlottesville has not been normal.

In this country, poverty persists.. Over the summer we have helped our local food banks, and Children North East to help prevent children from going hungry during school holidays – but life for people with limited resources is never normal..

I guess we probably feel closer to people whose everyday lives are more similar to ours.. , we can picture them working together, picking themselves up and refusing to let their lives be destroyed.. Working together with strangers to get things changed.

Working together like that with people we don't know is part of our experience too – when there is a sudden snowfall, or extreme rain event – or when a train is significantly delayed – and sometimes when we are celebrating together – setting up the spring fair for instance.. We think of it as a British trait but I think it is a human response to challenge..

The church is called to live like this – ‘**as if, in Christ, normal service has been permanently suspended**’. As if we are coping with a crisis of some sort - or sharing a celebration. Is that how we do live? As if we are drawn closer together by collaborating - whether to solve problems or to party? I think we do from time to time manage it – but probably not permanently

The section from Paul’s letter to the church in Rome which we heard read earlier is a set of 28 exhortations – encouragements not commands –(because of course we as Christians have choices about what we do) encouragements to living a Christian life – a life of faith – a life where normal service has been permanently suspended. It was sent to the church in Rome – the centre of the Empire, at a time, probably when Nero had recently acceded to the throne following the murder of Claudius, and when Christians as a group were seen as dissidents and heretics - dangerous.

You could look at these exhortations as a sort of ‘Rule of Life’ for Christians – including us. Just to look at a few:

⁹**Let love be genuine** If love is not genuine, then it has no power.. Love is a relationship between people in which each values the other, and which can be sustained in the face of challenge. Love for those who are familiar is easier than love for people whose lives and customs we don’t understand – though some of those who are familiar we also find hard to value.. When we encounter people we don’t like or find easy to get on with – or in our connected world when we can see the floods rising, the people fleeing –we are challenged to act with genuine love.

¹²**Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer.**Faced with all the challenges and suffering of life, it is also important to make space to pray, and to keep holding all the difficulties we encounter in our lives and the lives of others up to God.

¹³**Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers.** Hospitality has always been at the heart of Christian communities – how could it be otherwise when a shared meal is at the heart of our faith- and Paul makes clear that hospitality should extend to those who are different or unknown - inclusion is important.

¹⁶**Live in harmony with one another; do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly; do not claim to be wiser than you are.** It is important that we don’t become arrogant – thinking that people with less resources, or different in whatever way are somehow inferior –This was an issue in quite a lot of Paul’s churches as people from many different backgrounds were drawn to follow Christ.. It is important to recognise that for God – and therefore for us – everybody on earth matters equally.

‘if your enemies are hungry, feed them; if they are thirsty, give them something to drink.’ We are used to making judgements about good and evil – though probably we are all glad not to be President or Prime Minister when it comes to decisions about war and conflict.... Paul reminds us that it should be God who judges, not us – and therefore even the way we treat people who may be frightening or dangerous should recognise their humanity and their needs.

The bottom line is, we should as Christians **overcome evil with good**.

When all of the exhortations are followed, they will help each of us as individual Christians, or all of us as a community, to love God, and to love our many and diverse neighbours.

Love is the 'fruit' of a Christian way of life. It is created within us, by the presence of the Holy Spirit, and by the way in which we live.

In our Gospel reading, Jesus says: **those who lose their life for my sake will find it...** If we hold on to our own needs and hopes, then we are not focusing on others.. However, if we try to love genuinely – even people we don't find easy to get on with.. If we open our hearts and our hospitality to strangers and people very different from ourselves – if we recognise that God loves each of us equally – and that even when we are faced with great evil, it is God who will judge.. We will not fit in with society at large – but we will be living as Christians. 'Jesus promised his disciples three things - that they would be completely fearless, absurdly happy, and in constant trouble'. If we follow the guidance Paul offers in Romans, we will probably be all three.

*God of constant mercy,
who sent your Son to save us:
remind us of your goodness,
increase your grace within us,
that our thankfulness may grow,
through Jesus Christ our Lord.*