

Sunday 4<sup>th</sup> October 2020 v2

Trinity 17

Readings:

Philippians 3. 4b-14

Matthew 21. 33-end

To everything - turn, turn, turn

There is a season - turn, turn, turn

And a time to every purpose under heaven

The opening words of a song by the Byrds which incorporated words from Ecclesiastes chapter 3, and was released back in 1965.

My wife, Jane, and I came across St. Michael's church at Sollars Hope on one of our recent walks, when the weather was still warm and reliable, but not too hot.

The present church dates back to 1390 and was founded by Robert Whittington, the elder brother of Dick Whittington. There's a distinctive mound in the churchyard representing the location of the stronghold of the Whittington family and it is possible that Dick was born there. And what words do you associate with the pantomime version of his story? "Turn again Dick Whittington....." So it was that I came to start turning over the word 'turn', in my mind! It's one of those words which, in various forms turns up many times in the Bible. 597 times in the Old Testament and 75 in the New Testament.

There is that circular meaning of turning, like a good old-fashioned vinyl record spinning round, or a potter's wheel that spins round, or the seasons which turn around, just as we are experiencing at the moment. Then there is the about-face meaning of turn. The turn referred to in the baptism and confirmation services where candidates are asked, 'Do you *turn* to Christ as Saviour?'

Recently we had that delightful reading from the Book of Jonah. The king of Nineveh after hearing Jonah's message said, "All shall *turn* from the evil ways and from the violence that is in their hands. Who knows? God may relent and change his mind; he may *turn* from his fierce anger, so that we do not perish." (Jonah 3.v9).

Turn, turn, turn...

We are used to hearing about 'turning' in the political life of our nation. In media speak turning – and particularly U turns, are often seen as a sign of weakness. And this not a recent thing. It was back in 1980 that the then Prime Minister, Margaret Thatcher in a speech to the Conservative Party conference said, "To those waiting with bated breath for that favourite media catchphrase, the U-turn, I have only one thing to say: You turn if you want to. The lady's not for turning!"

Turn, turn, turn.

After Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem, Matthew tells us in his gospel that, "Jesus entered the temple and drove out all who were selling and buying in the temple, and he *overturned* the tables of the money-changers and the seats of those who sold doves."

Perhaps this was a symbolic act in line with the way in which the prophets of the Old Testament not only proclaimed, but also acted out the word of God given to them. The defiant act of Jesus spoke as loudly as his actual words – probably louder.

Just as in the story of Jonah, God had given Nineveh another chance, so in today's gospel reading Jesus is giving the Jewish authorities in Jerusalem one last chance, by telling them a story; the parable of the wicked tenants. The imagery was clear enough to them. The image of a vineyard had been used from time immemorial to represent the people of Israel and the tenants represented the priests who were called by God over the generations to tend that vineyard with the utmost care.

It's easy in retrospect and from our standpoint to point the accusing finger at that religious group, but of all those generations of priests who, like all humans sometimes served well and sometimes not so well, this particular generation found themselves to be at a critical point in God's story. The expectation that God would send a Saviour, a Mes-

siah, a king, is well documented in the scriptures they studied and taught so carefully. Isn't it so easy to get an idea into your head, then build expectations around that idea - usually one which feels comfortable for **us**. At home we often do a crossword together, and frequently get hung up on a clue because our minds go off on the wrong tack! We get stuck in one way of thinking and it is difficult to break out of it.

It must have been difficult for those chief priests and Pharisees that God should decide to send the long-expected Messiah on their watch! The reality was so far removed from the comfortable expectation that they had.

Jesus did not hold back. In telling the story he made it crystal clear to them that he was proclaiming himself to be that son sent by the owner of the vineyard. God. He went on to say, "Have you never read in the scriptures: ...." Gosh, no wonder they wanted to arrest him then and there. Their suspicion and their lack of openness to new opportunities and ways of thinking; their refusal to accept the possibility that Jesus was indeed the promised messiah, held them back. For them, what Jesus said in order to help them to turn from the error of their ways simply served to reinforce their prejudices. They heard what they wanted to hear. And that is the danger for all of us today. We have a nasty tendency to hear what we want to hear, see what we want to see and it follows; do what we want to do.

Turn, turn, turn. Not likely! Was their response. The priests were not for turning.

In Paul's letter to the church at Philippi we hear how complete his own U turn was. The language he uses to describe his own life and the dramatic change in direction it took is perhaps the verbal equivalent of Jesus overturning the tables of the moneychangers in the temple. Paul recites all the things that he formerly held to be of such importance. Which in worldly terms **are** seen as important. Things like status and origins. He dismisses them as so much rubbish. "I regard them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ.." (Philippians 3.8). Perhaps what you might expect from someone who had such a dramatic turning to Christ on that Damascus road.

Just over a week ago I read an obituary of Robert Graetz. He was a white, American, Lutheran minister. In 1955 he took charge of a church in Montgomery Alabama. Shortly afterwards a parishioner, a black lady called Rosa Parks was arrested for not giving up her seat on a bus to a white passenger. Graetz helped to organise a bus boycott that became a pivotal moment in US civil rights. In the 1950's and 60's he was harassed - by the police as well as many others, received threats, bombs were placed outside his house. On one occasion a deputy sheriff warned him: "We like things the way they are here. We don't want anybody trying to change them."

This is the challenge for us. Is that something you might have found yourself thinking, or even saying, in Hereford and as someone worshipping in the West Hereford Team; perhaps not now -but before the pandemic? 'We like things the way they are here. We don't want anybody trying to change them.' Words which could just as easily have been used by those chief priests and Pharisees two thousand years ago.

Now, as we seek a new Team Rector; as we find ourselves in the middle of a pandemic; a time of upheaval, change and a fear of the unknown. A time of loss and not a little despair, let us not just long to return to how things were. Let us fully embrace the challenges of the moment and the challenges of the future full-heartedly 'turning to Christ'. Opening our minds and lives to his will.

Turning can be hard and costly, but the gain (to use Paul's words) is 'the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord.' (Philippians 3.8).

Let us be able to proclaim with conviction, and both in word and deed.

**your kingdom come,  
your will be done,  
on earth as in heaven.**

Amen

Chris Webb