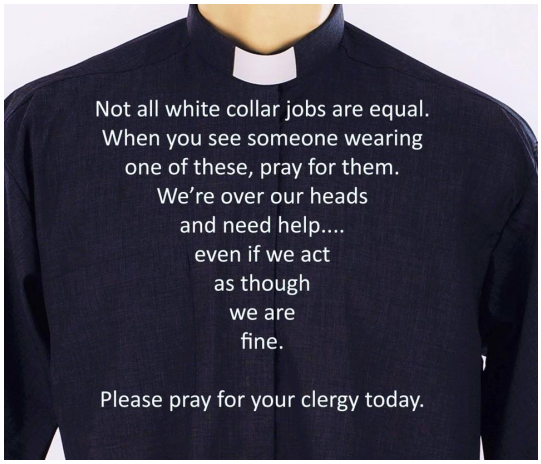
Sermon for the 9th Sunday after Trinity (Year A)

'Faith or Fear?'

Appearances can sometimes be deceptive; not everyone we see with a miserable looking face is necessarily unhappy. Conversely, when we see a cheerful countenance it doesn't always mean that all is well in his or her life.

Last Sunday before church, someone politely asked me "How are you?" My automatic reply was: "Fine" but then I hesitated and corrected myself: "No, in fact it's been a very stressful few weeks and I'm absolutely exhausted!" For that was the truth and rather than put on a brave face and pretend that everything was well I chose to make myself vulnerable and be open and honest about how I felt.



This week I came across a powerful Facebook post – a picture of a clergy person wearing a dog collar. I read: "Not all white collar jobs are equal. When you see someone wearing one of these (i.e. a dog collar), pray for them. We are over our heads and need help… even if we act as though we are fine."

Even the Old Testament prophets weren't exempt from busyness that leads to burnout. In today's Old Testament reading from 1 Kings the prophet Elijah was in the midst of a particularly intense period of his ministry. It had culminated in a challenge with the prophets of Baal on Mt Carmel (1 Kings 18). Now following an altercation with Jezebel who was furious about his victory over the prophets of Baal he feared for his life he feared for his life.

Elijah was exhausted and clearly not thinking lucidly. He cried to God: "Now Lord, take my life, for I am no better than my fathers" (19:4). But the Lord was having none of that and instead sent an angel to minister to administer to him just what he needed – food and drink and his strength returned.

Then whilst Elijah was still at a low point God chose to reveal himself to him at a special place Mt Horeb (aka Mt Sinai). But it was not in the remarkable way that he might have imagined. Elijah firstly witnessed a great wind, but God was not in the wind. Then a violent earthquake - again God was not in that. Then a fire and alas God was not in the fire. Lastly a still small voice, wherein Elijah found what he had been searching for. God had been there all the time but not in the most obvious place.

Elijah opened his heart to God: "I have been very zealous for the Lord God of hosts." (19:14). Indeed he had, but he had paid the price physically and psychologically. There was perhaps even an element of self-pity in his response. However, God dealt with him sensitively and rather than let him dwell on his situation gave him three new assignments to accomplish (19:15-16) and assured him that he would not be alone as there were still 7,000 in Israel who had not bowed down to Baal.

In our Gospel reading, Jesus' disciples were probably both exhausted and elated having just help feed a crowd of 5,000. Jesus knew that they likewise needed rest and recuperation so he sent them off ahead of him across the Sea of Galilee whilst he stayed behind to dismiss the crowds (Matthew 14:22). Having done so Jesus went up the mountain. Not only to be alone but more importantly to pray. Meanwhile, his disciples found themselves battling the wind and waves on the lake and were terrified. Now remember that some of them were seasoned fishermen and for them to be frightened it must have been pretty rough.

Then in the same way that God had met with Elijah at his lowest point, Jesus walking on the water came to meet his disciples in their hour of need. "Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid". (14:27). What followed is a cameo of impetuous Peter attempting to join Jesus on the water. But rather trust Jesus, Peter focussed instead on the prevailing wind and waves. He was literally at his lowest point as he began to sink under the water and cried out: "Lord, save me!" (14:30). This is a cry that God will always answer and I mean always. Now for the crux of the matter Jesus's response: "You of little faith, why did you doubt?" – it all essentially boiled down to a question of *faith* versus *doubt*.

What lessons can we take from today's readings and apply to our own circumstances (and I include myself in this)? We are not exempt from the challenges of life that test our faith and resilience. We've seen it in the life of Elijah and Peter. St Lawrence the first Archdeacon of Rome whose feast day we celebrate likewise faced many such earthly challenges and remained steadfast in his faith to the point of martyrdom.

Christ offers us all an invitation to refocus our attention away from ourselves and our circumstances, whatever they may be and centre on God. If Jesus needed to take time to go to a remote place to be alone, pray and re-centre, so must we. Faith comes when we focus our hearts and minds on God and not on our present circumstances and apparent weaknesses. Like Peter, we need to cry out to God "Save me!" As St Paul writes in his letter to the church in Rome: "For everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved". (Romans 10:13). Amen.

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