



Sermon on 17th Sunday after Trinity 2021 | Reverend Canon Stan Evans

‘Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in in your sight, O Lord, my strength and my redeemer’

Psalm 19:14

At his father’s funeral, David Gates (song writer and vocalist in the group Bread) was told by a family friend, “Your dad was so proud of what you were doing.” In response David wrote the song “Everything I Own”, which was recorded by Bread in 1972.

The song speaks of a longing to have a loved one back, no matter what the cost.

Perhaps we’ve lost someone special and have regrets about our relationship with them. We might long for one chance to say “sorry”, “thank you” or a simple “I love you.” Our longing might cause us to say, “I would give everything I own just to have you back again.”

Sometimes there are moments when we need to rethink our priorities, decide what’s really important to us and reflect on how we want to live whatever time we have left to us.

In our Old Testament reading we hear how the Israelites craved for all that they had had before their long journey of 40 years through the desert. The responsibility of their plight rested heavily on Moses – all that had been good has been wiped away and the only thing left was the manna they looked at. Moses pleads with God to give him guidance as to how these people are to be fed – and again we hear of the number seventy being the Lord’s instruction to Moses to gather a team around him and send them out and when the spirit rested upon them – they prophesied. In this book of Moses – the reader is taken on a long journey which lasted for 40 years because the people failed tests of endurance, ethics, good judgement and faith. But God persevered with them.

The Revd Stan Evans

Camino de las Cuestas 5c | 35572 Tias

Email: chaplain@lanzarotechurch.com | T: +34 928 514241



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In today's Gospel reading Jesus challenges us to think about how seriously we take his urgent proclamation that "the kingdom of God has come near". He asks if we would give everything we own, our lives, our hearts, our homes, just to be with him in God's eternal kingdom of love. He invites us to think about what prevents us from living kingdom-centred lives and to decide what to do about these obstacles.

Jesus tells his disciples that "whoever is not against us is for us". He is responding to the disciples who tried to stop someone casting out demons in his name because he wasn't "one of us". The kingdom of God is all-inclusive and we will have to give up any thoughts that we are special and exclusive with a right to make judgements about who belongs in our fellowship and who doesn't.

Jesus takes a common-sense approach. If someone is acting effectively in the name of Jesus, they're hardly likely then to oppose or undermine Jesus himself. On the other hand, Jesus utters a dire threat against anyone who actively tries to undermine the faith of "one of these little ones". Jesus may be talking about children but his words could also apply to the way we treat new or vulnerable believers, some of whom may be struggling with their faith. We're not to do anything to make things too difficult or complicated for them so that they give up on the journey altogether.

Jesus then tells us three times that if any part of us prevents us living a kingdom life we are to sacrifice that part of us.

And it will involve sacrifice if the obstacle holding us back is something we value (our hand, our foot, our eye) or cling to (harmful habits, grudges or prejudices).

Jesus says that to live the eternal life of God's kingdom we need to be ready to give everything we own, our lives, our hearts or our homes, and we need to do get ready now before it's too late. So we are faced with some challenging questions:

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How do we think about and treat people who are different from us and have different ways of expressing their faith?

Do we think we're right and they're wrong?

If so, we need to humble ourselves and become more accepting of those we are tempted to exclude from our fellowship.

Can we identify aspects of our lives that prevent us from following Jesus and loving God with all our hearts, minds and strength? Some of these obstacles may be obvious: words and behaviour that are contrary to God's ways of truth and love. But there may be other less obvious things that quietly unsettle our faith and eat into our hearts and minds, taking up space in our lives that could be opened up to God.

Our hands might be busy with computer games that are insidiously addictive and brain-numbing. We may use our eyes to watch or read things that degrade human dignity, glorify corruption or violence or present immorality as somehow an acceptable norm.

Only we can reflect honestly on our lives and see the things we may need to sacrifice in order to live a more kingdom-centred life. But let's heed Jesus' call to do that sooner rather than later because the kingdom of God is near.

Once we are saved and have surrendered our life and "all that we own" to Jesus – we can rest assured that whatever trouble we face – we have the Creator of the universe on our side to help us, equip us, and give us the peace only He can offer.

So let the words of our mouths and the meditation of our hearts, be always acceptable in God's sight, who is our strength and our redeemer.

AMEN.