**REVIEWING OUR PRIORITIES IN LOCKDOWN**

**Sermon preached for 11.00am Sung Eucharist**

**St. Edmundsbury Cathedral**

**Sunday 26 July 2020**

**St James Patronal Festival**

Television has helped many of us get through lockdown. Escapism, “brain candy”, gives relief from the uncertainties of the pandemic. My brother and I send each other shorthand recommendations by text: *The Old Guard* – Netflix; *Midnight Special* - Amazon Prime. There’s a sci-fi and action theme.

In many of these dramas, as the story develops the main character reaches a turning point. They face a choice when they must decide what their priorities are. In the series *Warrior Nun*, the heroine is an ordinary young woman who suddenly is given supernatural powers. She has to decide whether to return to her old life or to join the band of warrior nuns who defend our world from demons and evil powers. As I said, “brain candy”.

Here in the real world, reflecting on what’s most important has been part of the lockdown experience for many of us. The disruption of normal life has thrown up all sorts of questions and issues. No coffee shops for eight weeks! That’s longer than Lent! Being deprived of what we take for granted has highlighted what we value deeply, as well as what we can live without. I survived those weeks without my coffee fix. But not being able to pass the time of day with people on the way to those coffee shops was more challenging – missing bumping into people and the joy of regular human interaction. You’ll have had your own challenges.

Reviewing priorities has been part of the lockdown experience for us as a society too. We know how previously undervalued key workers have now been recognised: NHS staff; people working in supermarkets and the food industry. Home schooling has helped parents appreciate how important teachers are. Hopefully as a society we will now put our money where our mouth is and ensure key workers have a decent standard of living.

Priorities are at stake in this morning’s Gospel Reading. The sons of Zebedee with their Mum make their ambitious request. The other ten disciples react self-righteously. Jesus responds that their priority should be elsewhere. Following Jesus is not about status: “whoever wishes to be great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be your slave”. [[1]](#footnote-1)

This misguided priority is all too familiar to us. And it’s not difficult to identify other mistaken priorities in our lives and in society.

A healthy economy is crucial for us all, but the lockdown has highlighted how much our economy depends on consumerism. Were you disheartened too when lockdown was eased and the Chancellor encouraged us to go shopping? Our society promotes outward material achievement at the expense of our spiritual lives; material gain at the cost of a sense of connectedness to our world and even to ourselves. [[2]](#footnote-2)

Re-connecting with our world has been another lockdown experience. For a while in my house we thought there were more birds this year. We realised in fact we were noticing the birds more. “For so long birds and animals have had to listen to us and our mechanical beasts”, but during lockdown the urban hum of humans was pushed back. “We now have the chance to do something we should have done a long time ago: to listen to the world.” [[3]](#footnote-3)

The extended Sabbath of the lockdown has highlighted another dominant priority in our society: how we work. With so many people working from home, the future of offices is in question. Remote working has highlighted how much time people spend getting to work, as well as the time they spend at work: how so many of us live to work, rather than work to live. We are aware again of the great imbalance in society: how work dominates the life of many with long hours day after day; whilst others cannot find work and are unable to nurture their talents.

BBC Radio has produced a podcast called Rethink. It’s about how the world should change after the pandemic. Leading thinkers share views on a wide range of topics, from the environment to the economy, from education to healthcare. The contributors include Pope Francis. He said this: “Every crisis contains both danger and opportunity. Today I believe we have to slow down our rate of production and consumption and to learn to understand and contemplate the natural world. We need to reconnect with our real surroundings. This is the opportunity for conversion. … This is the time to take the decisive step, to move from using and misusing nature to contemplating it. We have lost the contemplative dimension; we have to get it back.” Pope Francis talks about how we see each other as human beings, including how easily people who are poor are not seen as people at all.

As we review our priorities, what it means to be human needs to be at the centre. The mistake the disciples made was to believe their value came from their status. Our value comes from being made in God’s image and part of God’s creation, not from being consumers, not from being workers. Jesus teaches us that our true value comes from being part of God’s life: reflecting the divine way of self-giving, sharing in the divine life of compassion and mercy.

*Canon Matthew Vernon*

*Canon Pastor & Sub Dean*

1. Matthew 20.20-28 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. See Angel Kyodo Williams in “being black - Zen and the art of living with Fearlessness and Grace” [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Zahid Hussain Radio 4 Prayer for the Day 18 April 2020 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)