Before I retired, I was rector of West Tarring, a parish on the northwest side of Worthing – the parish is an “Archbishop’s peculiar”, a strange title which I hasten to explain means that the Archbishop of Canterbury is patron of the living. One of the stained glass windows in the church commemorates S. Thomas Becket, who, as Archbishop of Canterbury (1162-1170) was a former patron of the parish. Becket is also commemorated within the parish boundaries – there is a Becket Road, a S. Thomas’s Road, two schools and even a public house which bear his name.

During my incumbency, I was given a copy of TS Eliot’s play Murder in the Cathedral, not an easy work to read, but nevertheless quite interesting, chronicling the days leading up to Becket’s martyrdom.

In the play, Becket has to make a life changing choice. It occurs at the point when King Henry l’s four knights approach Canterbury Cathedral to make Becket recant his stand against the king; and Becket knows that if he doesn’t, then the only alternative will be his own death.

Becket’s priests urge him to bolt and bar the cathedral doors, but Becket refuses, saying:

“I give my life to the law of God above the law of Man. Unbar the door! Unbar the door! … We have only to conquer now, by suffering. … Now is the triumph of the Cross, now open the door! I command it. Open the door!”

In the dramatic words of TS Eliot, Becket chooses not man’s way, but God’s way - the way of the cross.

In the Gospel reading this morning, we heard how Jesus explained to the disciples that as God’s Messiah, (the Son of Man), he was going to have to ‘undergo great suffering ... be rejected ... and be killed’. For the disciple Peter, such a prediction must have been utterly confusing.

It’s clear that Peter had no notion of a “Messiah Saviour” who would willingly suffer and forfeit his life. Peter held the view of most Jews of that time, that when the Christ came, he would conquer their enemies and reign in triumph. Knowing that this view prevailed, it seems Jesus was aware that he had much to explain to his disciples when he told Peter to try and think in God’s way rather than in a human way. His mission was to ensure the victory of truth over falsehood, forgiveness over revenge, self-giving over self-interest. This, Jesus explained, was God’s way of thinking, God’s way of saving people from themselves - from selfishness and greed. What Jesus didn’t need was the constant distraction of people trying to make him into their idea of a Messiah, complete with crown and magnificent white horse.

So he calls the crowds to him. He needs them to know the consequences of being his disciple. He tells them that following his way would inevitably incur immense effort, expense, suffering and even for some, death. Just as he himself is to suffer, so too his followers must be prepared to follow the way of the cross. While for some it would mean actual death, for all, it means the death of self-centred aims and desires, and the acceptance of unconditional, self-giving love. His way must be their way.

However, such a way does have its own special blessings and rewards - for the way of self-giving love opens lives wide to the love and friendship of others, to life’s deepest joys and satisfactions. Whereas, those who live only for themselves lose out - becoming prisoners of their own selfishness, isolated in their self-obsession.

Putting it simply, if we keep ourselves to ourselves, that’s all we get. Furthermore, life at its best is not found in grabbing at wealth, power and status. In such grabbing we lose our true selves, says Jesus.

Christ calls us to choose the way of the cross by overcoming evil with good and by thinking and living in God’s way. His way is found in simple things, like bearing insults when collecting for a good cause: or in standing up for someone who has been unjustly wronged.

On 9th April 1945, Dietrich Bonhoeffer was hanged at Flossenburg concentration camp. Devoted clergyman, brilliant theologian and saintly Christian, he chose to oppose Hitler and so sealed his fate. In July 1944 Bonhoeffer had written, “It is not the religious act that makes the Christian, but participation in the sufferings of God in the secular life”.

Few of us are ever faced with the choices of a Becket or a Bonhoeffer, or even Alexei Navalny - but in less dramatic ways we are all called by Christ to think and act in God’s way, to overcome evil and meet human need.

25 February 2024