

Sermon for the first Sunday after Trinity 2021

Many, many, years ago I worked for a company which organised school skiing trips to Austria and it was my job to accompany groups in resort and organise everything that they needed from equipment hire to après-ski events, to translate for them and to sort out any problems they might have had. Some groups were more memorable than others, and a particular one that sticks in the mind was a bunch of naughty boys from a school in North London. The teacher who was leading the group told me that the school motto was “non nobis solum” – meaning “not for ourselves alone,” but that given a liberal translation of the Latin it might as well mean “it weren’t only us, Sir!” since that was what the children seemed to say most, seeking to deflect blame whenever they were caught.

And this is what Adam and Eve do in that well-known reading from Genesis describing the Fall of Mankind, the reading with which we begin our carol services at Christmas to remind ourselves of why it is that we need salvation in the first place such that God became incarnate in Jesus Christ. Adam and Eve are representative of us, Mankind and Motherhood, and in their sin of disobedience they both seek to blame someone else, or at the very least to share the blame. “It weren’t only us, Sir,” they cry, pointing an accusatory finger elsewhere in the hope that they can convince themselves and God that they are not guilty. But they are. And God is not fooled, even if in their disobedience they manage to fool themselves.

I don’t know if you have heard of Ollie Robinson, but he was in the news this week. He made his debut for the England cricket team as a medium-pace bowler in the first Test against New Zealand, and he took a couple of wickets on the first day. Well done, Ollie Robinson. But when he walked off the pitch at the end of the day, the assembled media were less interested in the best of his sporting achievements, but more wickedly gleeful that they had discovered that some ten years ago he had, as a teenager, sent some messages on social media which ticked all the usual boxes for faux contemporary outrage. His unguarded remarks on the internet had been childish, thoughtless, unkind, and perhaps even offensive, but it takes a particular kind of poisonous and wicked journalism to seek to spoil the best day of his life by lying in wait with an undisclosed and hateful attempt to point a finger of guilt to grab a scoop of thin air. They chose their moment to point the accusing finger, and gave no credit to the fact that people do sometimes grow up and leave behind the idiocies of their youth.

I hope that my own selfish, arrogant, thoughtless, and foot-stamping tantrums of fifty years ago will not be held against me now that I have grown up a bit. There are still witnesses to this period of my life. But then children can sometimes be childish. Perhaps this is more the point of our time on earth that we be shaped by circumstances and situations and learn to make better choices as we grow in God’s love, and through his Grace be forgiven to enable us to make a new start, again and again.

Jesus makes clear that his great and miraculous works of healing do not come from Satan. A house divided against itself cannot stand, which is to say that evil is not fought successfully with more evil. The finger pointing thing doesn’t make anyone feel any better, just serves to show that you are a snitch as well as a sinner. Those who are part of my family, says Jesus, are the ones who do God’s will – not the ones who delight in the sins of others or pretend it’s all someone else’s fault. Take responsibility and do the right thing. Apologise; move on; grow up. Perhaps we should be less interested in the sins of others and rather more interested in our own – the ones we can do something about. Perhaps also we should be less eager to point out where others have fallen short and more ready to support and encourage the best of what we can be.

I learned a lot of things at school. I guess that’s the point. But I learned more in my Latin lessons than how to translate school mottoes. I learned about Caesar’s Gallic Wars, the speeches of Cicero, and an extensive European vocabulary. I learned good manners, polite behaviour, confidence, generosity, and respect in both victory and defeat.

And I learned to take responsibility for my choices and actions, my attitudes and my behaviour, to try hard and try again, to help others and not to criticise, and to celebrate the best in myself and others. As my Latin teacher often used to advise – “Strive to do your best, and don’t be the sort of people who applaud dropped catches at cricket matches!”

Amen.