

Trinity 2 2020 Statues & Images

21 st June Trinity 2 What we should have had.	9.30 Holy Communion	Jeremiah 20 vv 7-13 p779 Romans 6 vv 1-11 p1132 Matthew 10 vv 24-39 p975	A&M 207 Praise to the Lord the 220 Fight the Good Fight 237 Take Up Thy Cross 430 We Find Thee Lord 510 Sent Forth By God's
21 st June Trinity 2 What we should have had.	11.00 Holy Communion	Jeremiah 20 vv 7-13 p779 Romans 6 vv 1-11 p1132 Matthew 10 vv 24-39 p975	HHT 3 All My Hope 1 A Man There Lived in 10 Be Thou My Vision 84 Praise We Now 32 (tune A&MR 260) God is Love 98 We Have a Gospel

What do you think about the *Black Lives Matter* protests and the toppling of statues? Obviously, black lives matter. Someone did stress to me that all lives matter, which they certainly do. We are all made in the image of God and Christ died for everyone of us. It is true, however, that there is racism and that there are far too many examples of black people being treated as though their lives mattered less than the lives of white people. This is an injustice which Christians are bound both to deplore and to seek to remedy.

But today I want to talk about toppling statues. The first couple to go were of people most of us hadn't heard of. When we learnt about them and how they had made their money, we quite possibly felt that they ought not to be honoured by having their likenesses displayed in public places, even if they did do a lot of good with the profits which they had made from slavery. We might have thought that it was wrong for people to take the law into their own hands and remove them without going through the proper democratic and legal channels. We might worry that history is in danger of being misrepresented and even forgotten if we don't remember these men and what they did, bad and good. We might wonder whether it is fair to judge people who lived in times very different from our own by the standards we try to live by today. In the same way, there are many people who say that we have no right to judge what people do in other countries, with cultures very different from ours (eg Iran or China or North Korea), by contemporary Western standards – whether Christian or secular.

Then they started attacking the statues of people like Churchill, someone whom most of us respect very highly. Without Churchill, we might not have been on the winning side in World War II. There could have been a statue of Hitler in Parliament Square, a government basing its policies on theories of racial superiority, and the Gestapo, rather than the Metropolitan Police, policing demonstrations.

But, even so, Churchill had his faults. We all have our faults. If we took down all the statues of people who are not without sin, we should only be left with images of Jesus. There are many Christians, though a minority within the Church, who would say that even images of Jesus are transgressions of the Second Commandment. *Thou shalt not make to thyself any graven image, nor the likeness of any thing that is in heaven above, or in the earth beneath, or in the water under the earth. Thou shalt not bow down to them, nor worship them: for I the Lord thy God am a jealous God, and visit the sins of the fathers upon the children unto the third and fourth generation of them that hate me, and shew mercy unto thousands in them that love me, and keep my commandments.* No image tells the whole truth. Therefore, every image is a lie.

Cromwell is admired for his honesty in that he insisted that the portrait to be painted of him by Peter Lely should include *warts and all*. Cromwell's statue stands at the entrance of the House of Commons because of what he did to assert the authority of Parliament, even over the monarch, one step on the long road to democracy. Yet Cromwell was also a very flawed character. He brutally suppressed the Irish population, conquering Ireland in fact, and imposed penal laws against Roman Catholicism, the majority faith of the Emerald Isle. He was also prominent in demanding the execution of King Charles I, suppressing English royalists, and imposing an unpopular Puritanism on the whole country, including abolishing Christmas. He even had one of my predecessors as Rector of Cuxton removed from office.

If we put up statues to people other than Jesus, we have to acknowledge that they are of men and women who are (like all of us) mixtures of good and bad. How good do you have to be in order to deserve a statue to be put up in your honour? How bad do you have to be to be disqualified from having your likeness displayed in public places? Are there absolute standards such that right and wrong are the same in every age, all over the world and in every human culture? Are the rules the same, should the rules be the same, in twenty first century Britain as they were in Roman times or as they are in Iran today? Should we judge Rome and Tehran by our standards? Do we have the right? Should they judge us by their standards? Do they have the right? If there are absolute rules which ought to apply in every age and in every place, where do these rules come from?

I should say that there are universal standards and that they come from God. God is love. He creates everything that there is in His Wisdom. He is just and merciful. These universals are of the very essence of God, and therefore of the universe. Given that we human beings are made in His image, love, wisdom, justice, mercy ought to be of the very essence of our nature. We are judged by our likeness (or otherwise) to the likeness of Christ, Who is the very image of God, what human beings are supposed to be. God reveals His Being to us in Nature and in Scripture and, above all in the life, death and resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ. The Ten Commandments are a key part of His revelation of Himself to the world.

And this got me thinking. People are very emotional about these statues. Some people regard them as so offensive that they must fall. Others are deeply attached to them as symbols of our history and culture and expect the authorities to take whatever measures are necessary to protect them. There is talk of an up to ten year prison sentence for anyone defiling a war memorial – a much longer sentence than you'd get for knocking down an old lady and stealing her week's money. Are the more extreme Protestants (and Jews and Muslims) right that we take these statues too seriously? Some of us are treating them as though they were images or idols either to be honoured or to be abhorred. In the end, the Bible is very clear, idols are nothing, the work of human hands. They have no power. They are a lie. The work of human hands cannot be worthy of worship. Human beings are not worthy of worship. Only God deserves worship. *I am the Lord thy God: Thou shalt have none other gods but me.*

The only true image of God is Jesus. Jesus reveals God as He is. Jesus embodies the universal standards by which we are called to live, in every age and every place, love, wisdom, justice, mercy. In Romans 6, we read how we are baptised into Him. He die to sin. We make a new beginning, a fresh start, growing into the fulness of eternal life in Him. We are His people. We bear His image. We are signed with the Cross at our Baptism.

Our lives, therefore, are to exemplify, to demonstrate, these universal values - love, wisdom, justice, mercy - in all our doings. We bear witness to Christ, not only by what we say and do, but by being what we are, the people of God, the brothers and sisters of Jesus Christ. The values of our society ought to be embodied in Jesus and in His followers, not in stone or bronze, mounted on plinths. The most prominent people of the past may or may not be good examples. That is a matter for judgment. What is much more important is that we in our generation are found faithful and that we are good examples to the world in which we live. St Peter calls us living or even lively stones in the Temple of God, offering up spiritual sacrifices to Him. Living or lively, not dead; flesh not stone, flesh animated by the Spirit. That's what we are and of infinitely greater value than any graven image.

Our readings today indicate that this may in no way be easy. We may even face persecution for our faithfulness to the Gospel. But we can trust God to look after us. Whatever we may have to face on His behalf, it certainly is worth it. *He that findeth his life shall lose it: and he that loseth his life for my sake shall find it.*