

THE STRESS-BUSTER

William Booth, founder of the Salvation Army, stood up to speak to the students who had just finished their training as Salvation Army Officers. He smiled grimly and said, *“I sentence you all to hard labour for the rest of your natural lives.”*

A good opening, I thought, for the Ordination as Elder of the man who leads our Property Team and is therefore responsible for the upkeep of this huge building. It is a “24/7” job. It never ends.

Roger, the boiler has broken down. Roger, the basement is flooded. Roger, the lift does not work. Roger, the church roof is leaking because the lead thieves have stolen our lead. Have the police been informed? Yes, they will send someone round in six weeks’ time. Roger, the electrician has not turned up, the gas man has not turned up, the roofer has not turned up. There is a plumber sitting in the Car Park but I don’t think he is meant to be here. And so it goes on...and on.....and on.

The work of Pastoral Elder, which Margaret is now taking up, can be equally unpredictable because people do not have pastoral needs to order.

Margaret, did you know that Mrs Blenkinsop had a burglary last night? Margaret, I thought I ought to tell you that Mr Higginbotham is seriously ill and his only son is in Australia for six weeks. Margaret, I heard a rumour that Elsie and Phillip are having marital problems- what do you think we ought to do about it? Margaret, poor Cynthia is in hospital with pneumonia. Does her pastoral visitor know? Yes, I expect so. She is the next ward with a broken leg. And so it goes on.... and on..... and on.

Now Margaret and Roger are not fools. They know exactly what it is that they have taken on and they are doing this work with open eyes and loving hearts. We are richly blessed to have them here.

My problems began when I looked up the Bible readings for this Sunday. Normally the readings from the lectionary, which are offered to churches of different denominations all over the country, have an amazing way of being appropriate to whatever is going on at St John’s Church on any particular Sunday. So I looked up the Gospel reading, which is the pivotal passage for the service and there I read, *Jesus said, “Come to me all you who are weary and I will give you rest.”*

Is there any verse in the Bible, I thought, more inappropriate to the Property Team Leader and the Pastoral Elder? If I read this they will throw something at my head. It’s like taking the micky: on the one hand we are sentencing them to years of hard labour and on the other we are saying, *“Don’t worry, Jesus will give you rest, even if we don’t.”*

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I could of course have changed the reading- we are not forced to use it. But I thought I should at least look at the context in which Jesus said this. Having done so, I was surprised people did not throw things at him too.

These verses are the end of what sounds like a fairly lengthy sermon and we have been looking at the previous passages over the last few weeks: first Jesus calls his disciples and sends them out to heal the sick, feed the hungry, stand up for the poor, preach the Gospel. Then he warns them that a lot of people will make life difficult for them and they could be in for trouble. Then, as Ann Cook reminded us last Sunday, he tells everyone listening that they have their part to play in the kingdom of God.

Jesus did not waste time, as many theologians have done, trying to explain his exact nature and divine credentials. He simply told the messengers to go back and tell John what they had seen: the sick healed, the lame dancing, the poor relieved. Is this not this, he said, what the Son of God is all about?

And even nowadays, when the majority of the population are sceptical about religion and dismiss the claims of Jesus Christ to be anything other than a good man who lived two thousand years ago, what makes them wonder if he might just be more than this are the signs of God's kingdom in his people. When they see Christians working to make a difference in the world; offering love and care to those around them; supporting each other in solidarity to their faith; creating and keeping their church buildings to be places of prayer and community-sharing– this is what makes them wonder if there might just be something in it after all.

And so today, as we affirm the calling to which Roger and Margaret have responded and the ministry to which our Pastoral Visitors are called, this encourages each one of us in our own faith and in our conviction that Jesus Christ is the Son of God. We see what each of these people are doing and we are then glad and proud to take our place alongside them in the church and in the kingdom of God in the world. Our weariness is lightened. Our anxieties are soothed. We may be committing ourselves to hard labour but we shall also find our rest.
Amen.