

SERMON

The Rt. Rev Dr. Jill Duff, Bishop of Lancaster

If I had one word to describe lockdown Lancashire it would be this: Acceleration. Three examples, there's been an acceleration in relationships, people have come together to work for the common good. Acceleration in technology, we've been so amazed how agile our churches have been, in offering online worship, three out of four of our churches are offering online services. And most excitingly there's been acceleration in the Gospel, I'm finding I'm in everyday conversations, I'm reaching the point of talking about Jesus much faster than ever before. In our encounter with the highest rate of coronavirus in the country, people are facing death and asking the big questions in life.

You are joining us today in the fruit of this acceleration, the Reverend Sarah Gill, a quarter England from Pakistan has been pioneering our monthly multi-lingual services, these have reached across the Diocese of Blackburn and cross boundaries both national and international. Here in our town of Blackburn, known for its history of innovation, people speak an amazing total of seventy languages. Punjabi and Urdu are the languages Sarah has chosen for our national service today, but in our first reading from Acts we find a surprising incident when Paul is prevented from crossing boundaries. He'd already been kept by the Holy Spirit from preaching in the Province of Asia. Now he tries to enter Bithynia, and I quote, 'but the spirit of Jesus would not allow them to'. How on earth did that happen? Well the clue is in our Gospel reading, when Jesus sent off seventy-two people on mission he was clear, when you enter a house, first say peace to this house, and if a man of peace is there, your peace will rest on him. If not, it will return to you. Here's the clue, peace always precedes an encounter with Jesus, we can tie our tongues in knots when it comes to showing our faith, the clue is to look for peace, if there's no peace, move on, don't waste your time.

Let me give you an example. All my ordained ministry has been in urban parishes across the north-west, and in our last parish, our vicarage was in the middle of Widnes, and surrounded by a number of nightclubs. The plus side was we had a fantastic curry house just minutes from our door, and one cold dark February night I was on my way to get our Friday night curry and I bumped into three teenage girls on the street, 'what are you doing out on a night like this? 'Mum was at Bingo and can't go home yet and Chloe's been thrown out of school' I felt helpless and so sorry for them, so I dug deep and well the only thing I had to offer and said, 'Well I know it might sound funny, but I believe that prayer can change things, and can I pray that Chloe gets back into school? 'Hmm. OK' So I prayed and I asked for the peace of Jesus, and when I looked up I was stunned, there was a change in the atmosphere, these three girls were like meerkats, their heads were up wondering what had happened, so they asked where I was from, and I invited them to come to church on Sunday.

Sunday came and I'm doing the kids work and to my horror in flounce these three teenage girls, and I say to my horror, because my children's work was not of a very high quality and we had about six different kids, on six different sized chairs around a table in the vestry and we were looking at the questions that Jesus asked, and today it was going to be, 'what do you want me to do for you?' So kids were drawing pictures in answer to that question. 'Huh, this is so boring!' The girls pouted and flicked their hair, one grabbed a felt tip in rebellion and wrote, 'I want Jesus to give me one pound twenty'.

The other two copied her mutiny and wrote the same thing, and not long after that they left. Later that evening they met a tramp on the street, he shoved some money into their hands, it was three pounds sixty. They showed up at church the next week. Chloe had got back into school, she brought her boyfriend to church, 'this is so boring', he said, and Chloe was right back at him, 'well she prays and things happen.' How can the Gospel cross boundaries? How could a middle-aged woman possibly communicate with three teenage girls on the streets of Widnes. The clue is the peace of Jesus. In our nation today people are crying out for peace, in our nation today the diagnosis of Jesus hasn't changed, the harvest is plentiful, and the workers are few. In our nation today the clue of Jesus hasn't changed, speak His peace, from heaven itself, heal the sick, Jesus said, 'the kingdom of God is near you'.

So, this week, why not invite the peace of Jesus into the situations you find yourself in, at work or at home, at school, or especially if you're at University. Try it, invite the peace of Jesus and you'll be amazed how the atmosphere really does shift and doors open for conversations about faith, and if they don't take a leaf from Paul's missionary journeys and move on. Or if you're new to the idea of church or Christian faith, all this talk of the peace of Jesus sounds like gobbledygook or 'Jolly Robinson', my mum used to say, well here's a challenge: find a quiet moment and then why not ask the spirit of Jesus to bring his peace to you today. You're inviting him to bring the atmosphere of heaven where all is well, where there is no more death, or mourning, or crying or pain. Where people are not judged by the language they speak or the colour of their skin, where all the incredible colours that he has made in creation come fully, fully to life, where the peace of Jesus, crosses all boundaries, all cultures, all languages, where heaven is near, it can break in today. So, to finish with the words of Jesus, 'Heal the sick, and tell them the Kingdom of God, the Kingdom of Heaven, has come near you'.

Let us pray.

Come down O most powerful Holy Spirit and subdue us, from heaven where the ordinary is made glorious and glory is but ordinary. Would you bring your peace from heaven itself to God our hearts, and would you bathe us with the brilliance of your light, like dew.

Amen.