

St Augustin's Church 28th February, 2016 Lent 3

Does your car run on faith?

If not, what else does it need?

Churches and other faith communities were delighted by research which, I am told, produced a car that *would* run on faith. It was spoken of as the very latest evidence of 'the glory of God', shown, in this instance, in the glory of a motor car. The Churches were aiming to show it off in Bournemouth's forthcoming "Wheels" festival in May ~ that would be 'one in the eye' for the atheists!

There was great excitement when a prototype was produced for testing. The driver got in and was told that if you said, "Thank God", the car started and would increase speed with more "Thank God"s!

It sounded good ~ after all, isn't faith and gratitude what the world needs more of? ~ so ~ very good to encourage them! Oh, and to slow or stop you said, "Amen". Easy ~ and brilliant! ~ the glory of God shining forth in a car!

So the test drive began. "Thank God", said the driver, and off it went; and all went smoothly until he reached a hill. It took quite a few "Thank God"s to get the car to make it up the hill, but, once over the top, it positively whizzed down the other side ~ indeed, a little too fast: "Amen", said the driver. Nothing happened. The car gathered speed even more as it

went downhill. “Amen!!”, said the driver again, more sharply. Nothing. And he saw a cliff approaching at a hair-pin bend, with the car now going far too fast to make it safely round the corner. He positively yelled, “Amen!!!”, and, in the nick of time, the car shuddered to a halt, front wheels already over the precipice. The driver wiped his brow, “Phew! Thank God! ..... Aghhh”

After his funeral, it was agreed that production of the once-glorious faith-car would proceed no further.

You need more than just faith to run cars.

Faith and a show of glory don't get you very far by themselves, there has to be a lot of hard work going on under the bonnet!

So it is that Isaiah exhorts his hearers, including us:

“Seek the Lord while he may be found; call upon him while he is near,” that's the positive side – wait upon God, & listen to Him – knowing your need of Him; and on the other side of the equation, Isaiah doesn't duck pointing out that some of the hard work is about changing our behaviour:

“Let the wicked forsake their way, and the unrighteous their thoughts; let them return to the Lord, that he may have mercy on them.” That is also part of what Lent is about – albeit, most of us are not, as they say, very *original* sinners – it's all sorts of small nastinesses.

So it is that St Paul writes to the Corinthians that the quality of their behaviour – the morality of their lives- matters, as it did with the Israelites in the wilderness, after Moses came down from talking with God in the cloud of Glory on Mount Sinai. In Exodus we are shown God giving the ten commandments to Moses, & making it clear that God’s glory had a down-to-earth moral aspect to it ~ that is, the way you treated other people, and all life on earth, mattered. And did the people of God immediately respond with enthusiasm? They did not. Rather, Moses discovered that, whilst he was talking with God up the mountain, the people had been up to all kinds of things ~ read the story for yourselves! God’s glory is very easily lost, or turned upside-down, by unlovely human behaviour. Fig-trees that don’t bear fruit, St Luke’s Gospel tells us, will ultimately run out of chances – you can’t go on ignoring God forever, in your behaviour, without becoming *not punished* but self-damaged, so that you don’t cope well, any more, with goodness and honesty and kindness.

Now, don’t misunderstand me, this is not leading to a guilt-trip! Most of us don’t need that; and the church has somewhat ‘gone to town’, unhelpfully, on guilt in the past.

We don’t need more guilt; rather, God’s glory is only seen, enduringly, in ***love-in-action***. That’s what we need. Indeed, it is the integrity and focussed love of a person that means we can sometimes see a certain radiance about them, which shows the deep passion in God’s very being for justice, peace

and healing. Therein lies our hope: not that we are made to live that way, and sometimes fail, and often have to start again; no, that's just a fact of life! Rather, our hope lies in the very nature of God, as 'loving-kindness', who is **always ahead of us**, and leading, beckoning and persuading us forward, towards greater goodness than we had ever thought possible.

Bishop John Taylor got it right in his poem, Lent:

Jogging blind through winter's leaflessness

We must last out this marathon of rain and cold,

Though grime gathers under the grey duress

And faith is grown old.

Give back our springtime so the first petals' pink

Falls like alleluias through the melting air,

Deep in the loose loam let the gnarled roots drink

And clenched ferns open to the sun in prayer.

+