

St Mary's Church, Dorchester, Sunday 6th June 2025 i.e. 3rd Sunday after Trinity. This was one of our regular healing services at St Mary's.

Isaiah 66:10-14

Galatians 6:[1-6] 7-16

Luke 10:1-11, 16-20

In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

One of the joys of living in a vicarage is that we have a steady stream of unexpected visitors. Sometimes they're people we know, friends who were in the area and who fancy a chat. Sometimes we get wayfarers, men and women of the road who are looking for a cup of tea, a sandwich maybe, maybe some cash. Members of the congregation here, of course, also have reason to knock on the door at different times.

Most of these guests come to our house because it's a vicarage. Not so our local Jehovah's Witnesses. You'll probably think that I'm weird, but something I find endearing about Jehovah's Witnesses is that they don't seem to know what a vicar is; and if they do, they don't seem to care. I find that quite refreshing. On Friday morning we had an older lady and a younger lady with her two children. I got distracted part of the way through the conversation because the younger woman's daughter was utterly delighted by the flowers in our front garden: at one point she was kneeling beside the flower bed, and she had cupped a geranium in her hands and was pressing her face into it. It's lovely to see kids enjoying nature.

While the girl was distracting us, the older lady had noticed that we had a sign in our window. The sign says, "Peace" in Hebrew, in Arabic, and also in English. In a deft move – one that reminded me of Saint Paul in Acts chapter seventeen – this lady pointed out the sign in our window and she said, "Ah, I see that you're interested in peace; I've got a pamphlet about that." So in addition to the pamphlet she was going to give me anyway about an upcoming event, I also got one about war. I had fun reading it on the beach on Friday afternoon; so now I know what the Jehovah's Witnesses say about the end of war.

Jehovah's Witnesses present Anglicans with a challenge. Here we have a group of people who are deliberately and counter-culturally living out Jesus' teachings in today's culture. They go out in pairs; they take very little with them in the way of material goods – with the exception of pamphlets, of course; and as I'm sure they would tell us if we expressed any curiosity about it, they go out like lambs among wolves. I wonder if they get any more training than Jesus' apostles did in

coping with rejection and hatred? If they do, I wonder whether it's enough.

I knew that I was going to be preaching about this Gospel text today. So it felt appropriate to talk about peace with these two women on our doorstep. Jesus also has something to say about peace:

Whatever house you enter, first say, "Peace to this house!" And if anyone is there who shares in peace, your peace will rest on that person; but if not, it will return to you. [Luke 10:5-6]

What Jesus says here assumes that Christians will be wayfarers, peripatetic ministers who take the Gospel with them into communities that resemble unharvested fields [10:2]. And if Jesus' disciples experience any peace on their travels it's because they have brought it with them. That's an imaginary that Jehovah's Witnesses seem to embrace. If they think about the history of our culture at all, they're happy to see most of our culture as completely alien to the Gospel of Jesus Christ, to the point where even groups who call themselves Christians are fair game for doorstep evangelism. The harvest is plentiful because, as far as they're concerned, no one has ever tried labouring here before.

Churches like ours are based on a different imaginary. For centuries, the Anglican experiment (and the Catholic experiment too) has not been merely to pick up the odd convert here and there – it was to transform a culture. Jesus gives us this metaphor of the field ready for harvest: Anglicans and Catholics are not content to treat the field as a miracle, as a one-off. Instead, our Church asks why the field is there, and it works to improve the field: to increase the yield generation by generation. The Anglican and Catholic ideal is that Christians will be stable, putting down roots in communities, so that the flourishing of the Church is mixed up with the flourishing of everybody else. The hope is that over time – and we're talking about centuries – it won't be easy to tell where Christian culture ends and secular culture begins. At least, that's the hope; you can judge for yourselves whether the experiment has paid off.

That picture of a field that ought to be producing better harvests generation by generation is part of the reason why this church was built. It's also the reason why the Church of England owns vicarages, and expects priests to live in them. And it's also the reason why Lydia and I chose to put a sign in our window with the word "peace" on it. Those of you who've had a visit from me will know that I do generally say those words when I go into someone's house. But I hope for more than that: I hope that the presence of this Christian community will bring peace here in a more lasting

way that any one visitor can manage on their own.

I said a few minutes ago that the apostles will only experience peace on their journey if they take it with them. If we in this church community enjoy peace – and sometimes it feels like a big “if” – it will be because we are making good use of the particular opportunities available to us. We have the opportunity, for example, to get to know one another over a longer period of time, “warts and all” as they say. Staying in a single place gives us the chance to notice how we rub each other up the wrong way; it gives us time and space to reflect; and out of that reflection to learn repentance and forgiveness. Churches like this one are designed to produce opportunities like that kind of growth; let's make use of them.

Above all, our peace – such as it is – will come from the sacramental hospitality of the Eucharist. We come here to receive the Guest who is also our Host; the one who comes and offers us peace again and again, as many times as we need it.

In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.