

Reflection for Sunday 28 February 2021

Can anything good come from Great Snoring? Well yes. On this day in 1612 John Pearson was born in Great Snoring, a small village in North Norfolk, which is, you may be surprised to know, about a quarter of the size of nearby Little Snoring.

John Pearson rose to become one of the leading Christian thinkers of his day and eventually Bishop of Chester. He was praised for the quality of his thinking, which was profound, but especially for its clarity and balance.

He's no longer a familiar name. He doesn't have a day dedicated to his memory, but he was, it seems, not only a very great scholar, but was, by all accounts, a fine and caring bishop too, who, unlike many of his contemporaries, actually took his appointment seriously – even to the point of choosing to live not in Whitehall but in Wigan. John Pearson provides us with a worthy example of Christian discipleship.

There have been millions like him, not all of whom enjoyed his intellect, but their love for their Lord and their years of faithful service are no less significant. John Knowles, a wonderful servant of Slaley Methodist Church is a good example. John's funeral was just this week.

Many others are still making a huge difference to the communities in which they live, quietly, without drawing attention to themselves. And they, like John, are wonderful.

People like these show that you don't have to be put to the test in quite the way that Jesus suggests in order to follow him. It is not, thank goodness, the lot of many of us to risk shame and abuse for the gospel. Few of us are given the opportunity to take up our cross in the highly visible and perilous way that Jesus imagines may be the consequence of our commitment to follow him. What is more remarkable is that when that challenge came, there have been countless disciples who have been prepared to lose their lives for Jesus's sake and the sake of the gospel, while most of us are left to live a quieter life.

But such a blessing should never blunt the uncompromising challenge of Jesus's call to any of us. We are not called to an easy life of believing that religion is a supremely private matter and that we should keep our noses out of other people's business. Christianity isn't about the importance of upholding polite British restraint and respectability. It demands so much more of us, as today's Gospel makes all too abundantly clear. Being a disciple means putting love first and our own needs and desires second. Always. And if, as a result of this, life becomes uncomfortable or, very occasionally worse, that's the consequence of having put our hand to this particular plough.

It doesn't mean, of course, that we are to go around looking for trouble for trouble's sake. That would hardly be a fine example of how to put love into practice, but it does mean that we should be prepared to take risks, even extreme risks when not just the situation demands it, but whenever the chink of light of an opportunity opens up. And it can embrace so many things, helping to determine how we choose to spend our time and money and individually, but also, and this is so important, how we as a church choose our priorities.

To take a couple of very obvious and immediate examples, how are we to make the best, and most loving use of the buildings we have inherited? Are they given to us just to be mothballed for a few, very sparse special events, or can they be used to benefit the wider community in new and loving ways?

And what about climate change? Do we simply wring our hands and feel that we're too small and powerless to do anything significant, or should we actively seek every way possible to ensure that we can make a difference, however small it may seem? Do we take the Church of England's modest commitment to carbon neutrality by 2030 seriously? If we do, what are we going to risk doing?

The one thing that we should not fear is that of being ridiculed, shamed or falling flat on our faces in failure. That's what it means to take up a cross – the most immediately visible sign of ignominy that someone of Jesus day might wish to avoid. But we won't fail unless we try and if our courage fails us, we can take heart that the first disciples knew exactly what that was like. But remember too that they found that in love, all things are possible, and past failures are never a reason, let alone an excuse, for throwing in the towel. Nor should we fear judgement, for ultimately the only judge that really matters will judge us in love.

Today, 28 February is special. On it we remember fine, faithful disciples like John Pearson that the rest of the world has largely forgotten. We remember the millions of others who have not had the opportunity to express love in ways that folk will always remember.

Let's be grateful that few of us are called to deny ourselves and show our love in the way that Oscar Romero, Edith Stein or Dietrich Bonhoeffer did (and if you don't already know what makes them special, just reach for google). And as we give thanks for the life of John Pearson and our friend John Knowles and all the faithful saints who surround them, so we pledge ourselves to a renewed commitment to follow Christ, bravely and faithfully. It doesn't matter if we live in Whitehall, Wigan, Riding Mill, Blanchland or even in Great Snoring. Love always comes first.