

Sermon - Joan Grenfell, Sunday 5th March 2023

Teach us Good Lord.

Closed... For Stock Taking.

That was the notice on the front door of the SPCK Christian bookshop on one particular day of the year.

After I retired from teaching, but was not ready to give up being part of the workforce altogether, I applied for and was given a job at the SPCK book shop.

Some of you may know it and have visited it in Ridley Place.

My job description was 'Saturday Girl.' Girl... I rather liked that... Having just retired!!

I realised very quickly, that I knew absolutely nothing about the world of retail!!

But... The first job of the Saturday girl... was to Hoover the premises!!

Thank goodness for that... at least I knew how to Hoover!!

Over time, and helped by the kindness and patience of the Manager and Assistant Manager, I did learn about life in the retail sector, and enjoyed several happy years there.

Stock taking day was a different day.

The shop was closed, the notice put on the door; staff were allowed to come in casual clothes... usually sweater and jeans; and we were treated to a bacon bun or alternative before we began work.

Stock Taking is just that... taking stock... What has been sold... what has not. Getting a picture of how well the shop has done in the past year. Its successes and failures.

When we get to Ash Wednesday and the weeks of Lent I am always reminded of 'stock taking day'... and that sign on the door... 'Closed... For Stock Taking.'

It has always struck me that perhaps every church should have a sign on its front door during Lent... Open for Stock Taking.

For that is what Lent is about. About each one of us taking stock of how our discipleship has been in the past year... our successes and our failures.

The prayer on the front of the pew sheet [the prayer of Ignatius of Loyola] ranks as one of my favourite prayers.

It has a simplicity which makes it easy to remember... yet it has great depth of challenge.

The prayer spoke to me the very first time I heard it.

It's that first line, isn't it?

'Teach us Good Lord, to serve Thee as Thou deservest.'

It's the recognition that we might be failing to serve God fully... And that we need help.

Those words say it all. If there was no more to the prayer... that would be enough... those 10 words are a prayer in themselves.

'Teach us Good Lord, to serve Thee as Thou deservest.'

The prayer is attributed to Ignatius of Loyola... though some believe it was not actually written by him. That fact takes nothing away from the prayer.

It is also known as 'The generosity prayer' since its theme is 'How generous am I in my giving to God.'

It asks us to 'take stock' of our generosity towards God.

Some versions of the prayer actually begin...

'Lord, teach me to be generous... to serve Thee as Thou deservest...'

It is a hard hitting prayer... asking as it does... that in order to serve God as He deserves... We should... Give and not count the cost.

Fight and not heed the wounds

Toil and not seek for rest

Labour and not ask for any reward, save that of

Knowing that we do Thy will...

In giving us those challenges, the prayer is giving us a picture of the ministry of Jesus... a ministry in which He did not... count the cost or heed the wounds; He did not seek for rest... nor ask for any reward... because He knew that in all things he was doing the will of His Father.

Jesus life and ministry was one of complete surrender to His father's will, and when we pray 'to labour and not to ask for any reward, save that of knowing that we do Thy will'... we are surrendering ourselves, as Jesus did, completely to the will of God.

It is a prayer which expresses wholehearted commitment;

A desire to imitate Christ;

A readiness to work hard.

It is a prayer which invites us to consider how generous we are in our giving to God in respect of our:

Time

Energy

Money

Mind

Willingness

Love.

It asks us... Are we as generous towards God... as He is towards us?

For in His generosity 'He gave His only Son, so that everyone who believes in Him may not perish but may have eternal life.'

The final line of the prayer... like the first... could be a prayer in its own right...

'Teach us to labour, and not to ask for any reward save that of knowing that we do Thy will'.

It would be a prayer which tells us that whatever we do... or try to as disciples is not about us... but about God; that we are called to serve... not for accolades, rewards or admiration... but for the greater glory of God.

So... returning to the idea of stock taking... Perhaps we might use the weeks of Lent to reflect on... and take stock of our response to a generously loving God... Asking ourselves... How generous am I? And how might I be better?

So now, can I invite you to say the prayer with me?

Teach us, Good Lord,

To serve Thee as Thou deserves,

To give and not to count the cost;

To fight and not to heed the wounds;

To toil and not to seek for rest;

To labour and not to ask for any reward

Save that of knowing that we do Thy will.

Amen.