

Arts Festival 2007

St. Paul's words to his friends at Phillippi :

And now, my friends, all that is true, all that is noble, all that is just and pure, all that is lovable and attractive, whatever is excellent and admirable – fill your thoughts with these things.

A few days ago someone came into this church and stole some valuable items. They did more than that – they damaged the crucifix you see hanging behind me and they left syringes on the front pews. In the days following – when the anger and the despair about how low our society is getting started to abate in my mind – I began to make comparisons with that destructive and lowly act and what was going on not only in this church but in many places around Thatcham during this week of the Festival of Arts.

A mind that had become so warped by addiction that it will do anything to gain money to feed such an addiction – is the same mind that has the capacity to see beautiful things, create wonderful images, compose rich words and music. Hands that pulled the arms off the saviour of the world – are the same hands that can create exquisite pictures, carving, embroidery, crafts of all kinds. Drugs and medical resources that are used for a quick yet illusory answer to someone's dark inner pain are the same drugs and medical resources that to another will bring the hope of a new life free from pain and affliction. It is a world full of paradox – what can we make of it all and how should we react.

There is a short answer to this dilemma – God we believe created us to live in a loving relationship with him and each other. Love is not possible without freedom to choose : so God gives us that freedom – to choose to do good or evil, to be creative or to be destructive, to use our gifts for the good of all or simply for our own gratification. You and I have the choice.

When St. Paul wrote to the people of Phillippi he reminded them of that choice they had and in those lovely words with which I started my sermon he encouraged them to choose the things that were true, noble, just, pure, lovable, attractive, excellent and admirable. These are the choices of those who have made the decision to follow in the way of Christ.

But Christians do not have the sole ownership of these great virtues. St. Paul had come to recognise that there was a genuine capacity to choose good in the pagan society living around the Christian community and he suggests that Christians should honour this. The implication is that Christians should ally themselves with those in society who seek such higher virtues so that together the destructive and despicable side of life can be overcome.

I believe this is why it is good for us today to honour the creative skills that have been reflected in this week of art and leisure because it reminds us that despite the despair we might feel about the way our modern life is moving there are people within and around us who are dedicated as we are to the idea that as much as people might want

to destroy, there are many others who wish to create; that as much as people might want to generate ugliness, chaos and distortion in our world, there are many others who wish to produce beauty, order and harmony; that as much as people want to deride and scorn and hate, there are many others who wish to admire and wonder and love. – to be “lost in wonder love and praise” as the great Wesley hymn puts it.

The knee jerk reaction to some thing being stolen and damaged in church is for us to close it. Yet we have spent in the last nine years almost £250,000 in making so beautiful that people will want to come and enter into the wonder of the place. If we start to close the church, we will have been beaten by the forces of evil in our midst. It would be contrary to all that we stand for if we allow ourselves to be beaten like this. We need the help and cooperation of all people of goodwill in this town to make sure that the forces that destroy and corrupt our lives are overcome by those people who are guided by those great Christians virtues of truth, justice, purity and love that St. Paul told the people of Phillipi to fill their minds with.

We began our service with a hymn I have always loved – Angel voices ever singing.
Round they throne of light; angles-harps for ever ringing rest not day or night.
It is a lovely vision for those of us who love music and singing to know that heaven will be filled with such joy. But later on we sang that craftman’s art and music’s measure, for thy pleasure, all combine.

Today – on this last day of the Arts festival – we recognise that all creative gifts are given by God and that it is pleasing in his sight if we use those gifts to the best of our ability. There will have been many moments in this week when the people of this town will have pleased the heart of God. And when the force of good will have overcome the force of evil – so thanks be to God.