On our way to and from holiday in the south of France this summer we stopped at several notable places on the way, to break the journey. Two of them had magnificent cathedrals, Chartres, which most of you may have heard of, and Laon which you probably haven’t. However, apparently Chartres cathedral was modelled on that of Laon, which is situated on a large outcrop of rock in the plains to north east of Paris, and is visible for many miles.

As we were looking around the cathedral at Laon I noted that a famous theologian had been based there in the 11th century: Anselm. However, some further study showed that it was not the more famous St Anselm, who became Archbishop of Canterbury in 1093, but one of his pupils who studied under St Anselm at the abbey of Bec, in Normandy, before he came to Canterbury. So although Anselm of Laon was the wrong Anselm, as it were, it set me thinking about the lives of both men.

St Anselm of Canterbury had a very difficult and demanding life. As a boy his parents refused his wish to become a monk and treated him very harshly, until he ran away and became a monk at Bec, eventually becoming Abbot. He did much of his most well known theological work there and this led to him becoming the favoured candidate to be Archbishop of Canterbury, which he most unwillingly did, needing to have the Archbishop’s staff thrust into his hand. From then on his life was one of constant confrontation with first William II and subsequently Henry I. He was criticised by William for not giving him a sufficiently generous grant of money from his lands and then for not providing enough soldiers for William’s campaign in Wales. With Henry the main problem was with the King’s presumed right to appoint bishops, which the Pope, and Anselm, then refused to recognize.

Throughout all of this Anselm remained true to his beliefs and was not afraid to speak out and stand up to kings. But through all of these power politics and intrigue he remained basically a theologian, whose writings are still important today. Does this remind you of anyone today, perhaps our current Archbishop?

I think this is relevant to one of the themes we can discern from our readings today; standing up for what you believe, regardless of personal safety and comfort. From Isaiah we heard “The Lord God opened my ears and I did not disobey or turn back in defiance. I offered my back to the lash, and I let my beard be plucked from my chin, I did not hide my face from spitting and insult.” St Anselm certainly passes this test, even though he did not suffer the fate of his more famous successor, Thomas Becket, who was murdered in his cathedral. What about us? How do we measure up to St Anselm in standing up for our convictions?

Before we get too despondent pondering that question we should recognize that very few of us are called to work at this level, to be at the interface between the church and secular leaders, as Anselm was. Most of us might feel that we would fail the test of standing up for our Christian beliefs in a hostile state where we could be imprisoned, tortured or killed for such beliefs, even today in some places. But we are fortunate not to have to measure ourselves against the standards of these heroic Christians. In life it is pointless to speculate or agonize about things we are not called to. It is enough to think about where we are and what we are called to do.

Our challenge in this country to day is not to stand up to outright hostility to our Christian faith, but to indifference. Apart, perhaps, from Richard Dawkins no seems to think it is worth arguing with us about Christianity. Most people just don’t care. They see faith as irrelevant to their lives, and their deaths. I think this requires a different type of response from us to that we might use for open hostility. Because I don’t feel that arguments, debates, articles in magazines, and definitely not sermons, are of much use against indifference. Someone has to be willing to engage to argue, or read an article and respond; even if that engagement is from a strong conviction we are wrong and wanting to prove it to us. So what is effective?

The answer is found in St James’ epistle, which we have been using over the past few weeks and today. Today’s passage is not perhaps so relevant, but the whole thrust of St James’ writings is that faith is empty without works. This message was unacceptable to the protestant reformer Martin Luther, who called it an “epistle of straw” as he strongly felt that faith alone was enough to justify us before God. That debate is for another day, but what I think is undeniable is that works, ie visibly living our faith, is necessary to justify ourselves before the indifferent multitudes around us today. We will never draw their attention yet alone persuade them by what we say we believe. But if it is noticeable to all that we live in a different way, that our lives as Christians are more whole, integrated, honest, joyful and worthwhile, then we might just draw their attention. They might ask the question, “What is it about these people that makes them special?”

Just last weekend I was talking to a bell-ringing friend about my motorbike, and I told him that I had taken it abroad this year, to Belgium when I went on retreat to a monastery. He was quite surprised, not about the motorbike but that I should have gone on a religious retreat. He said he didn’t think of me as the sort of man who would do something like that. Perhaps I should be pleased that he thought I was a well-balanced and level headed chap who didn’t need that sort of help. But actually it acted as a wake up call for me. It showed me that I wasn’t living my Christian faith in a way that showed its importance. If people I know reasonably well can’t tell how important my faith is to me how will people I don’t know ever see it?

So, to have any chance of showing an indifferent world the importance of Christian faith we must live it. This both easy and hard. It is hard to be perfect and do everything we need to live our life as Jesus lived his. There are so many ways we can fail that feel to us more obvious to people than the fact we are really trying. But living our faith is not fulfilling some long list of must-do’s and is certainly not about being seen attending church, saying prayers or even contributing to charity. Faith is primarily about love and that is what we are called to do. The early Christian writer Tertullian described how outsiders see Christians as follows “look how they love one another.” Would any outsider say that about us, here?