

Fifth Sunday after Epiphany – 2017

A group of youngsters were having a show and tell for their RE lesson. A young man called Benjamin came forward: my name is Ben, I'm Jewish and I have brought along a Star of David. A second child came forward, my name is Mary I'm a Roman Catholic and I have brought a crucifix and a third child said hi, I'm Justin, I am an Anglican and I have brought a quiche. We do have mixed views about crosses; sometimes these views become contentious. Some folk say that the cross should always be empty because it is the risen Jesus that we worship. One rather grumpy old priest once said to me, 'an empty cross is about as much use as an empty manger!' I think all forms of the cross are important, in fact crucial. Here at St Philips we are dominated by a large, plain, modern cross, but importantly behind the pulpit we also have a crucifix. And yes, it's offensive, appalling, the ultimate in victimisation. It is there to remind us of the words we heard last week from Paul writing to the Corinthians 'we preach Christ crucified.' Paul emphasises this again today 'I decided to know nothing among you except Christ and him crucified.' The thrust of this opening part of Paul's first letter to the Corinthians is unity. There is division in the community and Paul is trying to draw the community together, not with eloquence or rhetorical flair, not with wisdom, authority, politics or brute force, but by the power of the Spirit of the crucified one. 'I decided to know nothing among you except Christ and him crucified.'

We are now hearing the Sermon on the Mount. It began last week with the Beatitudes. This is one of those crucial texts; but is difficult; it is outrageous, offensive. But I wonder if we think like this are we not in danger of having Jesus tell us that we putting human things before divine things, as he did Peter. The folk in the Beatitudes described by Jesus are all marginal, dependant people. The poor are in danger of people using their wealth and power against them, those who mourn are incredibly vulnerable, the meek...well everyone seems to hate the meek and the merciful they refuse to get into the vengeful tit for tat and like peace-makers they seem to fall in between the warring parties and be criticised by both. What I am saying is that the ethic of the Sermon on the Mount is that those who are in close proximity to God, the blessed, are vulnerable to becoming victims. But Jesus describes them as blessed. This is the problem with division, it creates victims and a thorough going theology of the cross is the way to eliminate victimhood, through the cross we are blessed.

I spoke recently about having a relationship with Jesus, a rather un-Anglican thing to do! I said at the time that a relationship is possible, it is essential, but it is unlike any other relationship. We cannot have a relationship with the person who *was* Jesus of Nazareth in the same way that we have a relationship with

our family and friends. But we can have a relationship with Jesus of Nazareth as God's Christ, one who was crucified and is risen. It is a relationship conducted at all sorts of levels, but primarily we should think of it sacramentally. We relate to Jesus *through* each other, *through* those in need, *through* the sacraments of the church and more. At the altar week in week out the words of institution are spoken. 'On the night he was betrayed, Jesus took bread.....' They are so familiar to us, they are words so filled with meaning. When Jesus has offered the bread and the cup to his disciples he says to them 'do this in remembrance of me;' remembrance is 'anamnesis.' Anamnesis is a key concept in our liturgical theology: It does not mean a rather passive 'remember me' as we might remember someone or some event, whilst browsing in photo album, it means make this event live again for us. At the altar the words of institution speak into being the sacrament and this becomes the means by which we can actually enter into the Paschal mystery. We don't just remember the Last Supper, we just don't just remember the cross and resurrection we enter into them. We are entering what Paul calls the 'mind of Christ.' The mind of Christ is the self-giving of God in which Christ becomes for us the universal victim. Remember the words of Paul in Philippians, when he says 'let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus.' Then we then hear that great hymn 'though he was in form of God, Jesus did count equality with God a thing to be grasped but emptied himself...' and it goes on to recall Christ's obedience even unto death, 'even death on the cross.'

All around us it seems we experience victims, they are ever present; so much so that sometimes I think we barely notice them. The poor, the hungry, the marginalized, the grief stricken, the persecuted, Jesus did warn us that they would be ever present and in the Beatitudes he says they are indeed blessed. How do we deal with these issues that seem so intractable, how do we deal with deeply entrenched disadvantage? Clearly I don't have an answer; but like Paul our communities are divided and are becoming more so. On one level we hold fast to the belief that the situations of those who live in dire disadvantage *will be* transfigured, and are therefore blessed. But there must be more. Jesus calls out to us to be salt and light to these folk, there is a moral imperative.

I believe that if we truly know the mind of Christ, if like Paul we know 'nothing except Christ and him crucified' then we have entered into his death and resurrection. We know then that Christ is *the* victim and this should give us the courage to take up our own crosses in whatever way that may be. And so be in solidarity with the disadvantaged, to join with them in blessedness and to banish division. To proclaim Christ crucified is to be one, to be in unity in a way so profound that it transcends all other relationships, situations and contexts; there can be no division, and we will indeed be blessed. Amen.