

Tenth Sunday after Pentecost 2019

Hebrews 11: 29-12:2, Luke 12:49-59

What is the sin that clings so closely we heard this morning in Hebrews? It will be different for all of us, but for many it is the failure to love those we have been given. It seems to me that the folk most ready to proclaim their love for humanity are those most likely to say that they can't stand their neighbour or their brother or their mother in law. We are called to love those whom we have not chosen: parents, siblings, in laws. 'We can't choose our family...' so the saying goes and that makes it all the more important that we love them, because loving family is an issue of justice.

Those of you, like me, who grew up with the Book of Common Prayer would remember being called to pray for 'the whole state of Christ's Church militant here on earth.' Included in those prayers was a prayer for the monarch, – you might be familiar with: *And grant unto her whole council and all who are put in authority under her that they may truly and indifferently minister justice to the punishment of wickedness and vice and to the maintenance of God's true religion and virtue.* These words served to reinforce the idea that what justice was all about – the punishment of wickedness and vice! We don't, as a general rule, couch our prayers in these terms today. So what of justice and mothers in law!?

Those of you familiar with Shakespeare's 'Merchant of Venice' might recall Portia's soliloquy 'The Quality of Mercy' in it she says of mercy: *It is an attribute to God Himself; and earthly power doth then show likest God's when mercy seasons justice.* Shakespeare seems to want to contrast the generous, merciful, and perhaps even feminine Christian idea of justice portrayed by Portia who has of course disguised herself as a fella! And the rather mechanical, retributive, masculine justice of the City of Venice (and the Prayer Book). Biblical justice is not foremost about the punishment of wickedness and vice. In the Old Testament justice is shown by the care for victims, the weak, the poor the marginalized, the stranger and the oppressed. Importantly in the New it is all about the Kingdom of God. Jesus teaches that justice creates and heals relationships, restores communities, it sets things right and overcomes offence, it is broadly speaking about family.

Last Sunday at 'Food4Thought' Baden Williams spoke to us about the issues of the villagers of the Highlands of PNG. These are our neighbours, we haven't chosen them, they are so close and yet their lives are so different from ours, unrecognisably so. And then this past week has seen our Prime Minister and his delegation travel to Tuvalu to engage with the leaders of the South Pacific Forum. It was rather telling that he described the folk of the South Pacific as 'family.' Much has been said about the forum particularly issue of climate change and the impact on low lying Pacific Island nations and this is clearly an issue that many wish to see action on. But when you look more broadly at the problems besetting many of these nations there is an

overwhelming issue, it is that of justice. We are by far the largest member of the forum by whatever measure you choose, we have a responsibility to our neighbours. Whilst the science of climate change may be difficult to understand the matter of justice is not. A careful reading of today's gospel reveals Jesus at his prophetic best and for the Biblical prophet's justice is their core business.

We need to clear up the misconception that Jesus wants you to hate your mother in law! That's not good form! To get a handle on today's gospel we need to turn to the prophet Micah and his Lament over Jerusalem. Jesus quotes the prophet almost word for word in his passage about the breakdown of family life. Micah's lament concerns the way that the people of Israel are behaving towards the poor and the marginalised, the refugee and the slave. It is summarised in that most famous passage which is inscribed for us over the doorway of St Philip's as we leave and should serve as a reminder to us all. 'He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?' Micah is saying that when we allow power and wealth to dominate our lives community fails and even our family life breaks down. I think Jesus, who clearly knows his Hebrew Scriptures, is saying much the same thing, if we consider the context of this text, Jesus has been speaking about the anxiety that comes from materialism and at this point you sense his despair as he considers the fate that awaits him as he looks to Jerusalem and his own self-giving, his demonstration of the love of God, a love which we are called to reveal in justice, kindness and humility. When this fails family fails, community fails.

Like Micah, Jesus' words are a call for justice. Jesus is telling us that his call for justice has the potential to disturb our lives, even our family lives. It is only when there is justice that we can hope to have the peace promised at Jesus' birth by the angels. Jesus says you fail to see these signs in your families, this breakdown in justice, how you can possibly see the bigger picture. And he warns us that our human justice will not cut the mustard, listen to each other, be reconciled with one another, this is true justice.

Family life is important, however you might understand family, and loving family is a justice issue, because it is indicative of the way that our relationships are on a bigger canvas. Our near neighbours should be able to look to us and to expect us to share out of our abundance. This week they have been described as family, but unless there is true justice this family life will be very rocky indeed. I pray that we can deal with them, as we should with all families, with true justice, kindness and humility. Amen.