

Third Sunday after Pentecost – 2019

1 Kings 2:1-2,6-14, Galatians 5:1, 13-25, Luke 9:51-62.

We are hearing much in the media about freedom of speech and freedom of religion at the moment, these are important debates; but we must be wary. Paul warns us in Galatians about using our freedom, be careful he writes that we do devour each other. It is a warning we need to heed; but how are to deal with one another? We are told to love and God and neighbour, how might we understand that, particularly when we are at odds with each other?

Have you heard the one about the Priest, the Rabbi and the Imam? We've all heard these jokes and at their best they are funny because they breakdown stereotypes, they make us think again. Now I'm not suggesting that Jesus did 'stand up', but when he says that a Priest, a Levite and a Samaritan were walking down from Jerusalem to Jericho he is doing much the same thing and I think this is the *first* step in approaching this tricky gospel text. Jesus warns against stereotyping but then goes on to say much more.

I often wonder what Jesus' family life was like! Jesus' interaction with his family in the gospels is interesting to say the very least. As a twelve year old lost in Jerusalem his parents would have been at their wits end looking for him and Jesus merely says: 'Did you not know that I would be at my Father's house?' You would be forgiven for thinking of Jesus as a rather precocious child. In John's gospel at the wedding feast at Cana Jesus is rather dismissive of his mother. When the wine runs out and she draws it to his attention we hear the rather terse response: 'Woman, what concern is that to you and to me.' In Mark we read of Jesus teaching in a crowded house and on being told that his family are concerned and are searching for him states 'Who are my mother and brothers...whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother.'

Today we hear, what are to our ears, more harsh words. They include his words to someone who was ready to join him on his journey, but needs first fulfill a commitment to family: 'Lord, first let me go and bury my father' Jesus says, 'Let the dead bury their own dead; but as for you, go and proclaim the kingdom of God.'

I read in the week of St Teresa of Avila describing such a journey, it's worth hearing the entire quote: "*We had to run many dangers. At no part of the road were the risks greater than within a few leagues of Burgos, at a place called Los Pontes. The rivers were so high that the water in places covered everything, neither road nor the smallest footpath could be seen, only water everywhere, and two abysses on each side. It seemed foolhardiness to advance, especially in a carriage, for if one strayed ever so little off the road (then invisible), one must have perished.*" The saint is silent on her share of the adventure, but her companions relate that, seeing their alarm, she turned to them and encouraged them, saying that "as they were engaged in doing God's work, how could they die in a better cause?" She then led the way on foot. The current was so strong that she lost her footing, and was on the point of being carried away when our Lord sustained her. "Oh, my Lord!" she exclaimed, with her usual loving familiarity, "when wilt Thou cease from scattering obstacles in our path?" "Do not complain,

*daughter," the Divine Master answered, "for it is ever thus that I treat my friends."* "Ah, Lord, it is also on that account that Thou hast so few!" was her reply. It's true, Jesus at the last had few friends, those to who he said 'I no longer call you servants, but friends' soon deserted him.

So what does this mean? Many commentators try to get behind these words of Jesus in the light of the culture and milieu of the day; some write that this is Jesus at his rhetorical best. We do need to be careful of projecting our own understanding of family and friends onto 1<sup>st</sup> century Palestine. But none of this seems completely satisfactory to me, I think these words are meant to be demanding, are meant to challenge us. Jesus challenged those around him, including his family. So how do we deal with them; can we have family and friends and commit ourselves to them and still strive to follow Jesus? The answer of course is yes. Indeed our striving to follow Jesus means that our relationships are even closer, but they are different; we are called to a new way of relationship, Paul hints at it today in an equally demanding passage about living together.

I wonder if anyone have ever asked you if you have a personal relationship with God. For many, it is considered the absolute minimum requirement for anyone claiming to be Christian. It is not a phrase that appears until sometime in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. But it is not simply a new phrase; it describes a new idea. It is not an idea we can find in the New Testament. It suggests that we can have a relationship with God in much the same way that we would with our family and friends and on one level I struggle with that. When I was questioned by the Clergy Appointments Board about my faith and practise before coming to St Philip's I thought they might ask me if I had personal relationship with God, fortunately they didn't. What I do remember however is describing myself as a sacramentalist.

I described myself in this way because think we need to see the world sacramentally. It expresses a belief in God's 'real' presence everywhere and I emphasise 'real.' The incarnation means that the divine has broken into our world and this changes absolutely everything. It means that everything 'potentially' has a sacramental quality. There is a breakdown in the division between the spiritual and the material. This is how we need to understand our relationships. So yes I do have a personal relationship with God *but* I can't separate that from my relationship with my family and my friends, with those I meet, those who look to me for care and yes even those who I may not like. You may not like the latest folk catching media attention: Israel Folau, Peter Dutton or whoever. You may like the person sitting next to you, you may not like me! This is what makes sacramental relationship different from the relationships that many other folk experience? It is much more demanding and this is what Jesus wants from us. Jesus wants us to break from the past, 'let the dead bury their dead.' He wants us live together 'in the Spirit' for our relationships be an image of the Godhead; relationships that proclaim the Kingdom of God.

Sacramentality is about reality, I believe that God in Christ is really present in our gathering in our sharing of the word, the peace, the Eucharist. We may not feel it, sometimes we might even think we are merely going through the motions, but it is real nonetheless. Sacramentality is all about what is real in each other. It is not just about emotion. It is not about how I *feel* about you, it is recognising what you

really are and that you too are journeying with me; we are bound by the Spirit, there is more to us and our relationships.

Jesus words are harsh to our ears, because we tend to think of the way that we *feel* about each other our family and friends. But feelings ebb and flow, and they are influenced by the past. If we are to proclaim the kingdom as Jesus calls us to do on this journey of life then we are to see sacramentally. See in each other and in our relationship and indeed the world the Spirit of God which is real and which calls us to deeper relationships and projects us into the future. Because in this way we do indeed commune with the divine, and the kingdom is proclaimed. From Longfellow:

Trust no Future, howe'er pleasant!  
Let the dead Past bury its dead!  
Act,— act in the living Present!  
Heart within, and God o'erhead!

Amen.