

The nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost 2020

In our increasingly complex world many folk crave simplicity. Now on level there is no harm in that. There is no harm in getting away, turning off our gadgets and immersing ourselves in the simple pleasure of walking on the beach or in the bush. Such things are indeed to be encouraged, they are good for our souls. But we cannot constantly live in such a state. If we are live fully then we must engage, and if we engage then very quickly we will understand that the world around us defies simplicity.

We can see this reaction against the complexity of life in many different ways. Many folk hanker for the straight talking politician who says it as it is! We long for simple solutions to complex issues...climate change, mental health, indigenous recognition. But our striving for simplicity will often involve taking a stand over and against 'the other' often on ideological lines. Some immerse ourselves in the echo chambers of social media with the false comfort of likeminded folk, who share the same answers. We do it in the Church too, we always have. We can that see in Paul's letters, even today there's a hint of division; be of the same mind he says. How we long for simplicity. But if indeed we are of one mind in Christ, simplicity is to be found in the command to love. Criticism is quite valid but outright judgement and derision of opposing views is quite another. Which is what we see in some of our called straight talking politicians, shock jocks, and some pastors. They are only really telling us half the story. And more often than not they are only telling us the half we want to hear.

Today we are well and truly in realm of the prophets. We are experiencing both comfort and challenge in equal measure the mark of authentic prophecy. This authenticity is something that in many different ways we should recognise. We should recognise it in the prophetic leader who is prepared to speak in such a way that appreciates difference, complexity, who lives with questions who offers both criticism and hope. Jesus is the prophetic leader par excellence and this is why parable is such a significant part of the way he communicates. How often does he say 'the kingdom of heaven is like?' And how often at the end of the parable are we left pondering as we sense that note of comfort and then challenge.

We are left pondering because in the parables our role is not clear, in the parables we play many different roles sometimes at the same time. I am both the older brother and the prodigal son at different times. This banquet that we are all invited to is full of all sorts of folk, but the wonder of it is that there are no labels, because how we love to label; it makes things so much easier! On this mountain the Lord of hosts will make *for all peoples* a feast of rich food, a feast of well-matured wines, of rich food filled with marrow, of well-matured wines strained clear. *All peoples!*

What a wonderful comfort that is, it's you and me and the Bishop and the irritating guy that knocks on my door looking for money, all of us without

distinction or label. But it's more than that, it's all of you and me in all our multiplicity of ways. Our goodness, generosity and loveliness and our hardheartedness, pettiness and greed. This is the challenge. So our friend has taken his place at the table of God's kingdom he has been invited along with all the rest of us. Remember the parable of the Dragnet, what a crowd we are; every kind of person imaginable is there! All of us in all our contradictions. But our friend is not wearing a tie!

Perhaps when you were baptised you wore a gown that had been handed down through the generations. I'm sure the Royal Family have such an ancient garment. In the early Church we are told the candidates for baptism would remove their clothing, and go into the water naked, though it was probably just their outer garments. This removal of clothing represented a particular death to the old self. It was a physical reminder that they were to be born a new person in baptism and had to cast off their old ways, discarding their old clothes in order to put on the new life in Christ. Immediately after baptism the newly baptized would put on a white garment, which represented the cleansing of their sins and the purity of their soul, born anew in the font of baptism and they would be brought from the baptistery into the main body of the church.

This baptismal tradition finds its roots in such texts as we heard today. But what is this garment and what does it represent? Clearly our friend has been subject to judgement. Do not judge and you will be not judged we are told. When we set ourselves up as judges, we are exposed to judgement, and we turn away from salvation. This surely is the issue when we seek simplistic answers to complex issues, we create division, and we judge one another. The wedding garment of our baptism is a reminder to us that the kingdom of God, a kingdom we glimpse here in our Eucharistic community is one in which there is no judgement of one another. Clearly our friend had not grasped this fundamental attribute of kingdom living!

We are living in an age in which our politics is too divisive, political leaders are increasingly using sound bites and tweets to fuel our demand for quick simplistic responses to complex issues. Journalism has rapidly followed. In all this our world has become more and more sectarian and we have become far too quick to judge those whose views we disagree with. We need to recall that we are seated at a table with those who trouble us.

Our community should be one modelled on those former Philippians. Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honourable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. This is the material of the garment of salvation. It has the only label in the kingdom: not do not dry clean or do not tumble dry, but quite simply: be slow to judge! Amen.