

The twenty-first Sunday after Pentecost 2020

Leviticus 19:1-2, 15-18; 1 Thessalonians 2:1-13 ; Matthew 22:34-46.

Very soon we will gather together and keep the feast of Christ the King, a particular favourite of mine and a worthy celebration as we are reminded once again where our allegiance, and therefore our identity lies. In former times it was known as Stir-up Sunday from the collect for the day: "*Stir up, we beseech thee, O Lord, the wills of thy faithful people.*" In similar vein in this morning's collect we ask that God might stir up within us the fire of the Holy Spirit. In classic Anglican fashion 'Stir up Sunday' became better known as the day when we stirred up the Christmas pudding mixture. It really rather says something about us; it is an endearing trait this sense of being a Church of the incarnation, a Church which keeps wonderful Christmas festivities, a Church which in true Benedictine fashion makes sacred even the simplest of household chores, like mixing puddings! And I for one don't want us to lose these traditions and ways; but I wonder is it enough for us be identified in this way in our modern age? I doubt it.

On Thursday I asked the congregation how they identified. Naturally I was confronted with some bemused looks! I'm sure they wouldn't mind me saying that that I was youngest person there! They are of a generation, as I am, in which such a question is not normally asked. And such a question if it was asked would be taken to mean, where do you live, what are you studying, what do you do for a living, are you a parent or grandparent, these are, or were markers of identity. I confess to have become somewhat cautious of the question, how do you identify. It seems to have become somewhat loaded and I wonder if it is a question that is ultimately at odds with our ethic? Surely for as Christians the question should be who do you identify with? Is not our identity to be found in the person of Jesus, we are after all members of his Body. But what does mean, how might we be identified as such?

That strange Book of Leviticus is not for many a natural starting point and perhaps for many of us the ritual laws that seem to dominate are irrelevant; but it is worth another look. What we heard this morning is a very ancient text and one which sets something of a foundation for us as we wrestle with the idea of identity. What we heard is a portion of what is known as 'The Holiness Code.' The words '*You shall be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy*' lie at the heart of the code. It reminds us that we are called into relationship with God, for us to be holy is to remain close to the source of that holiness.

But this is all very well I hear you say but what is holiness? Perhaps we should begin by saying what it is not. Holiness has throughout the centuries been linked with purity; think of the Pharisees or the Puritans. But we need to think again. Indeed one writer argued recently that the notion of purity is so problematic that it should no longer be used in public discourse and clearly as a marker of identity there are grave problems. The former Chief Rabbi of the UK Jonathon Sacks, likens the idea of purity with what he calls 'altruistic evil:

evil committed in a sacred cause, in the name of high ideals.' I think we can all understand his context and in ours we have such things as the Crusades and modern right wing movements to deal with. I notice one such movement in the US, alarmingly, is called Christian Identity.

Let's adopt the stance of the historians and continue with our primary sources. The first letter to the Thessalonians is perhaps the oldest writing in the New Testament, this is Paul writing to one of the early communities that he has founded. This should give us hints that he is trying to lay the groundwork of what a Christian community should look like, how it should identify. This is not without problems, typically Paul tells us he has been pure, upright and blameless in his dealings with this new community. But let's look at this text with our Jesus glasses on and consider three character traits that Paul highlights. The first is courage: courage to declare to you the gospel of God in spite of great opposition. The second is integrity: in us you will find no deceit. And the third is compassion: So deeply do we care for you that we are determined to share with you not only the gospel of God but also our own selves. I am to you as both a nurse and a father.

In the gospels Jesus consistently refuses to declare his identity; the riddle over his identity this morning silenced the Pharisees. As a consequence movements have come and gone in the Church trying to understand the enigma that is Jesus. Jonathan Sacks once wrote, 'fundamentalism reads texts as if God were as simple as us.' If Jesus is, as we believe, our reconciliation with this God we should expect that his identity is not simple and will remain just beyond our grasp; but as Jesus says if you don't believe in me believe the things that I do! God is what God does! And what Jesus does is change the very nature of purity and therefore holiness. Jesus challenges the purity laws, he says to those suffering under the weight of those laws, take my yoke; be reconciled. In effect he says take courage, he calls for integrity, and he demonstrates compassion. And when he is finally challenged to describe the very nature of the law he simply says: Love God and your neighbour as yourself. For Jesus this is what the law means, Jesus redefines holiness and this becomes is the marker of our identity.

I am reliably informed that in Oxford Turl St runs between High St and Broad St and passes Jesus College. One wag said that Anglicanism is like Turl it begins at the high, ends at the broad and passes Jesus on the way. I wonder if we need to be stirred up! The world is changing; quite clearly we will increasingly be called upon to exhibit those character traits that Paul described and which Jesus lived, a redefined holiness: courage, integrity and compassion. I hope and pray that these will be the markers by which will be identified – not just Christmas puddings! Let us stay close to the very source of our holiness, by loving God and neighbour. O God, stir up within us the fire of your Holy Spirit, Amen.