

17th Sunday after Pentecost Year B—19 September 2021
The Reverend Canon Professor Scott Cowdell, Hon. Associate Priest
Jeremiah 11: 18-20; Psalm 54; James 3: 1-12; Mark 9: 30-37

+In the Name of the Father & of the Son & of the Holy Spirit. AMEN.

Today's readings about watching our tongues, and about how to cope with opposition, along with Jesus' call to become like children, are not primarily about finding ethical principles, about getting our behaviour right. Rather, they're ultimately about coming to understand God and becoming more like God or, more prosaically, about cultivating Christian character. And that character comes first, forged in word and sacrament and the company of the saints, from which appropriate Christian behaviour follows. As James asks today, "Does a spring pour forth from the same opening both fresh and brackish water? Can a fig tree, my brothers and sisters, yield olives, or a grapevine figs? No more can salt water yield fresh" (Jas 3: 12).

James warns us today about the dangers of intemperate and judgemental speech in the Christian community—a lesson yet to be learned by many Anglicans, both clergy and laity, indeed by one or two congregations I've known. James gives a particular warning to teachers of the faith like me, who need to be especially careful because people will follow our lead. If the likes of me are harsh and intemperate from the pulpit and the lecture podium, James has a salutary warning: "you will be judged with greater strictness".

Jesus gets to the psychological heart of such hostile speech that can poison a community. In today's Gospel he catches his disciples playing the age-old game of one-upmanship and he counsels the very opposite: they have to learn a different vision of greatness, of success, and he commends his own humility, his own loving service of the human cause, as their role model. And then he puts a child in their midst—not a figure of innocence, or simplicity; every parent knows better than that if they're honest. Rather, the child is meant to be an image of powerlessness, of low status. This is where Christian character starts to bite. It means seeing ourselves in a very countercultural light, as content with low-status company, as non-players in the game of thrones, as those who've renounced the empty display and false values of the world, in the words of our baptism.

But of course, who thinks this way, even among so-called Christians? An example. In *The New Republic* this week past there was an article about vaccine resisters in America and those opposing mask and now vaccine mandates, who are predominantly from the political right with a high proportion of bible-believing Christians. And I quote:

The vast majority of Americans want the pandemic to end. Many of them recognized they had a role to play and stepped up to make sacrifices for the good of their country. They obeyed stay-at-home orders and wore masks in public places. They avoided contact with loved ones and put their lives on hold. When the vaccine became available, they leapt at the opportunity to put Covid-19 behind them. And now they are being held hostage by a minority of Americans whose understanding of freedom and liberty goes no further than personal convenience and whose sense of community and civic life is only felt through partisan hatred. The rest of this country should not be subordinated to their whims.¹

I think you can see who in this picture displays Christian character and who doesn't. You can tell by their attitude to intemperate and judgmental speech, and by their attitude to power and to service.

Now, how do we Christians deal with our frustrations and disappointments in the face of hostility and opposition, in the Church but more widely—feelings that I readily confess when I look at the knowalls and spinmeisters and swaggering bullies who we have to put up with in public life here and abroad? Our Old Testament readings today, from Jeremiah and Psalm 54, can help us.

Both readings acknowledge the problem. They don't pretend that everything's lovely. Christian character doesn't mean naivety. Jeremiah is very clear about this: "It was the LORD who made it known to me, and I knew; then you showed me their evil deeds" (Jer 11: 18). But the answer, even when persecuted for the truth, which happens every day in families and workplaces and on social media, isn't revenge. Instead, Christians can place these burdens in God's hands, giving up the universal impulse to seek vengeance. Jesus showed us at Easter how the vengeance machine works and how God bust it open in the resurrection. If we trust that, if our Christian character bears the mark of Easter, then we'll become the coolest and most forgiving and most resilient and most forbearing of people. Our Christian character will shift into gear when we're confronted by problem individuals. Then we can look beyond the monster and see the vulnerability and the fear that makes someone behave like a monster. Then, not being in the business of power and status—that is, being like children—we can trust our heavenly Father and not have to control every outcome ourselves.

But one more thing. At the end of our psalm today, which commends this character marked by patient trust, we receive this assurance: "For you will deliver me from every trouble: my eyes shall see the downfall of my enemies" (Ps 54: 7). Surely the second part of this verse should give us pause, about seeing the downfall of our enemies. Does this mean that the assurance on which Christian character is based, from which issues all the attitudes and behaviours enjoined in today's readings, is linked to the pleasure of seeing our enemies' downfall? If so then this is nothing but *schadenfreude*—the relish we take in seeing those who offend and oppose us getting their comeuppance.

We see this *schadenfreude* at work in many stories currently about prominent COVID sceptics, antivaxxers and mask refusers in America who are starting to die of coronavirus, often bitterly ashamed of themselves and repentant on their deathbeds. Articles and comment streams on news sites and social media are full of malicious glee at their plight, offering variations on "serve them right," with the political left well represented. Indeed, seeing the downfall of enemies was counted by some in the medieval era among the blessings that await Christians in heaven, being able to look on the sufferings of the damned in hell.

But I'd counsel against this. Jesus refuses to be the greatest, to be numbered among the righteous. He joins the least and the outcast on the cross and takes his stand with the fools, the wretched, the wrongheaded, and everyone that fine people like us might be inclined to look down on. And from this hell of human contrivance that our God refused to look away from comes the vindication of Easter day, with the thief crucified alongside Jesus leading our way into the resurrection life.

So, God's vindication in the face of our enemies doesn't look like vengeance, and it isn't a license for *schadenfreude*. Rather, God's vindication looks like resurrection, it looks like the conversion of our enemies rather than their destruction, it looks like the triumphant force of love, and it's an invitation. Not something for us to gloat in, but something to forge our character into a godlike, Christlike, childlike form, so that we Christians become a blessing to

others rather than a curse. That way we can oppose without hating, and critique without cursing, resisting human sin and folly without the worse sin and folly of schadenfreude.

The Lord be with you ...

[1] <https://newrepublic.com/article/163639/republicans-liberty-vaccine-mandate-outrage>