

## **SERMON – 4 SEPTEMBER 2020 - Matthew 18.15-20**

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

“Love your neighbour as yourself” writes St Paul – when Jesus uses that phrase he then tells the story of the Good Samaritan. Your neighbour isn’t only the person who lives next door, the person like you – your neighbour is also the foreigner, the outsider, the person who is different.

That is a message we struggle to hear, a message we don’t want to hear – last week I said it was easier to complain about a song rather than care for an asylum seeker – I will simply say this week that it is easier to play the song in the House of Commons, rather than ensure your wealth is based in this country and you pay your taxes in this country.

We want love to be something to be celebrated, wherever we find it – and many of us are pleased at the moves that have been made over the years to accept that love is not limited to what has been traditional. We have become a more accepting, more loving place – although it doesn’t take much to push the boundaries back, to retreat to hatred. Again, we’ve seen that this week – the new Trade Adviser to the Government has hateful views, and members of the Cabinet sit there, wearing their rainbow badges, and defend his appointment.

We will continue to fight the darkness, because the darkness seems to be in the ascendant. I need to remind myself, we need to remind ourselves, that “the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has never put it out.”

On a much more positive note – did you see the news that Polio has now been eradicated from Africa. That is amazing. The last major outbreak of polio in this country was in the 1950s, so not long before I was born. A vaccine was developed, and by the 1980s polio had been eradicated in this country – but not across the world. In 1996 polio paralysed more than 75,000 children in Africa. In the last 24 years, billions of oral polio vaccines have been provided, and 95% of the African population has been vaccinated. That would be a major success in any country, but they have managed to get into areas of war, famine, drought, refugees – incredible efforts have been made – and now Africa is free of wild polio. The World Health Organisation says that 180,000 lives have been saved. African nations have worked together, the world has supported, and something incredible has happened. There are challenges to come – we don’t get rid of the darkness easily. Afghanistan and Pakistan are the last two countries where polio has to be beaten – and now we have Coronavirus sweeping across Africa. Well actually, I typed that line “Coronavirus sweeping across Africa”, then thought I had better check that. Apparently, though, although there have been 1.2 million

cases of Covid in Africa, only about 30,000 people have died (so that is less deaths across the African continent than in our little country). It is suggested that, because the population of Africa has more young people, far fewer people normally live to be old – so the more youthful population in Africa means far fewer deaths. Fascinating! We pray for those coping with Covid in Africa.  
<https://uk.news.yahoo.com/scientists-suggest-theory-over-africas-162305222.html>

I love the phrase “put on the armour of light” – it fits with the image of medieval chivalry, or a Star Wars warrior, or a health worker in an African refugee camp (sometimes protected by something as simple as a tabard with a red cross). Network Rail often tweet about the orange army, those workers in their high vis jackets, whether they are involved in major infrastructure renewals, rebuilding after a failure or a natural disaster, or simply going the necessary maintenance. I remember, as a student in 1981, going on a trip across Scotrail – and that moment of excitement when I was handed a HV vest. I remember, too, Inspector Bruce, an old-school railwayman, reminding us that “just because the driver can see you, doesn’t mean he’ll be able to stop”.

“Live honourably” says Paul – this world would be a better place if we all managed to do that. “Put on the Lord Jesus Christ” – it makes him sound like a high visibility outfit, and perhaps that’s not a bad image. Our faith, our Lord, should be – not just our guide, our protector – but our being should be coming together with him. In prayer, in worship, in communion, in our journeying together, we seek to become as near one as we can be. Those of us who are fortunate to have a special person to love, know that coming together – and I don’t just mean in sex (as wonderful as that is), but in that growing together that lasts a lifetime. That also teaches us something about our relationship with Christ – we work, we pursue, a close relationship – and we don’t always find it easy (there’s a lot that gets in the way).

Our relationship with Christ, is also a relationship with one another. Our gospel has practical advice from Jesus. “If another member of the church sins against you, go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone.” I am glad to say we are not a church where there is a lot of sin, a lot of fault, a lot of fault-finding – and for that, I am very glad. But when there is a problem, go and sort it out. Not always easy. How often have we left it? I don’t want to make the matter worse. I haven’t got time to deal with it ... and matters fester.

I had a phone call last week from one of the old ladies at St Edmund’s. She is usually given a lift to church by another. That lady has said she is not giving lifts at the moment – that is the advice we have all been given. But the lady phoning me was in a dreadful state “She won’t bring me to church. I don’t know

what I've done to upset her. We've been friends for years." I calmed her down, gently explained that we are still in a pandemic, and lifts in close proximity are not a good idea, and no one had upset anyone. I was very calm, indeed almost gentle (yes, I know that surprises you), and a problem has been sorted. As the ladies' memory is not very good, she'll probably be on the phone again next week with the same problem – but then we'll sort it again. Not a problem!

It is not just in the church; the same advice holds good in almost any sphere of life. If you've got a problem, sort it out. So often you are so sure you've been sinned against, when you sit down together you find that it is simply a misunderstanding. Robin, who was my lovely Spiritual Director when I first became a priest, always reminded me that in the Church of England think mess up not conspiracy, most things that happen against you are probably incompetence or unthinking, rather than downright malice. Even if someone really has sinned against you, there may well be a good reason.

I'm sure I've told you the story of when Theo was in the Special Care baby unit at Addenbrooke's in Cambridge. We were one of several sets of parents. One of the dads was the sort of man most of us would go out of our way to avoid. He was built like the side of a bus, covered in tattoos, and we were scared. One day he was angry. He was shouting at the nurses, swearing at the doctors, Security was called, and he was escorted off the unit. The rest of us parents felt frightened, embarrassed, and later that day I said to one of the senior nurses how she should not have to put up with behaviour like that. "Peter" she said. "He's scared stiff. He has never known love, but he now has this baby he loves. He knows his baby might not survive. He can solve any problem, he can get his own way, he can beat up anyone who stands against him. But he can't sort this – he can't do anything." Later that afternoon, when her shift had ended, I went out of the hospital to make a phone call. Sitting on a bench sharing a couple of cans and deep in conversation were the dad and the nurse – thank goodness for those who will go the extra mile to sort out and try and understand. I often wonder if that baby survived, and put up a prayer in the hope that she did – she'll now be in secondary school.

"If another member of the church sins against you, go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone." This is personal, and when it's personal, and when it's involved with something important to us, like faith, then it's important. It is important to deal with sin. We want them to listen, to accept, to change. Our purpose is not to punish the offender, but our purpose is to regain that member – and that is important. We don't do punishment in church – which often puts us at odds with the way the world wants us to work. They don't get that we believe all humans are made in the image of God, that evil is part of all

humans, and that there is a power greater than the power of evil, the power of sin.

Society needs to learn that all humans are made in the image of God, and that there is a power greater than the power of evil. The Criminal Justice system is there to punish, of course it is, but its primary purpose must be to restore people to Society. That is expensive, and in most of our prisons it sounds as if it isn't happening because it's too expensive – though, of course, it is never as expensive as sorting the mess out when we fail.

“If the member listens to you, you have regained that one” – and that should be where it finishes. Dealt with, sorted, move on. Don't keep harking back, don't make the criticism long term and personal.

“But if you are not listened to, take one or two others along with you, so that every word may be confirmed by the evidence of two or three witnesses.” The same principle goes for the law in Deuteronomy – share the load. Two or three heads are probably wiser than one as well – it may be that one of these others may say to you, are you sure? Are you really sinned against? The number of times wise heads have calmed Peter down.

“If the member refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church” – don't go to a wider group before this point. We all know how poisonous gossip can be, how easy it is for discussion and conversation and muttering to explode – and many churches have been damaged by it. “If the offender refuses to listen even to the church, let such a one be to you as a Gentile and a tax-collector.” One of the bible commentaries I read said that “let such a one be to you as a Gentile and a tax-collector” is the same as “send them to Coventry”. There are many, many examples in the gospels of Jesus dealing with Gentiles and tax-collectors, treating them with far more respect than anyone else ever did, yet he can still use this example. As the commentary says, we can talk of sending someone to Coventry without necessarily having any personal dislike of Coventry as a city. As you know, my Julie is a Coventry girl – so I make no comment at all.

“Truly I tell you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven” says Jesus. He used a phrase almost identical to this when he commissioned Peter, now all the disciples are included in his commission. Divine authority, handle with care – we dare to believe that God works through us and with us. That should pull us up short, remind us of our position in creation, remind us of who we are here to worship. It does not matter who we are, which international business we have run, how much is in our bank account, that we live in the posh end of Derby – we are all equal in the sight of God.

“Again, truly I tell you, if two of you agree on earth about anything you ask, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven. For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.” Apparently there was a saying of the Rabbis, “if two sit together and the words of the Law are between them, the Shekinah (God’s presence) is between them”. I like that - “if two sit together and the words of the Law are between them, the Shekinah (God’s presence) is between them”. Jesus is saying that he is the presence of God, he is the only who sits between the believers – which is also a lovely picture.

We have re-learned over the last few weeks the pleasure of being “two or three gathered together” and, despite all my annoyance and my moans, we are part of a wonderful organisation, which seeks to serve God wherever God has placed us. None of us have to be perfect, none of us have to be brilliant – God simply asks us to do our best, and work with him. We are God’s people in this world, so the principles we are called to work on in church, are the same principles for the world. We all know that the world needs our principles, May God give us the strength we need to share them. Amen.

Peter Barham  
4 September 2020