

Sermon for Sunday 17 September 2023

Revd Canon Simon Pitcher, Rector

Genesis 50.15-21; Psalm 103.8-13; Romans 14.1-12; Matthew 18.21-35

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

The psalmist writes, 'The Lord is full of compassion and mercy, slow to anger and of great kindness.'

Mahatma Gandhi once said, I love Jesus Christ, but I struggle with you Christians because you're so unlike him. And the German philosopher Frederick Nietzsche once said, show me that you are redeemed and then I will believe in your redeemer.

I remember after the great hurricane of 1987, a nearby Methodist church was completely destroyed by the high winds of that fateful night. And the following morning, being a Sunday, somebody in our church said, 'Serves them right.' Where perhaps a better response might have been, 'What can we do to help?' So our Bible readings this morning are a reminder that the Lord is full of compassion and mercy and great kindness, and therefore the Church should look somewhat the same. Reminds us of our summary of the law, 'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and love your neighbour as yourself.' And our readings today add meat to the bones of that summary of the law.

So we cannot claim to love God if we do not love our neighbours as ourselves. And when we accept that we are loved by God, that we are forgiven and renewed by Jesus, that all the burdens that we might carry are swept aside and counted as nothing by God, when the Holy Spirit dwells within us, then surely that faith will make a difference to us, transform the way in which we see ourselves and transform the way in which we see others and transform the character of the Church.

We heard a reading this morning from St Paul's letter to the Romans. It's rather a confusing letter, an extract all about vegetables and things like that. Well, in the capital of the Roman Empire, the home of Caesar himself, the centre of Roman pagan religion, it was absolutely vital for the early Christian church to be united and to look Christ-like. Christians in that place faced persecution. The Church was a tiny minority in a very big city, and to have any credibility at all and any chance of survival, it was vital that the quality of relationships within that church were strong, Christ-like, merciful and kind.

And our reading this morning is an extract of how St Paul addresses a problem in the Church group, because their attentions and relationships are strained and there's a risk of people leaving the church. So St Paul writes, welcome the one who is weak in faith, welcome each other. So obviously, people in the church were feeling unwelcome. We don't exactly know for sure why people were feeling unwelcome, but the problem was something like this. The early Christians had been preaching the Christian faith in Rome, and that had caused one or two disturbances. And in response to those disturbances, the Emperor Claudius had banned all the Jews from Rome. And the early Christians, Jewish Christians preaching

about Christ Jesus were therefore silenced, and we read in Acts 18, verse two, Priscilla and Aquila, members of the early Church had to leave Rome at this time. So they were possibly leaders of that early Christian Church. And most of the leaders of that Church would have been Jewish men. And all those leaders are now expelled. So there are now no more Jewish Christians in the church in Rome. And non-Jewish converts kept the church going. A few years later, the expulsion of the Jews lapsed and they began to come home and to re-join the Christian Church in that place. But they found that during their absence, things had changed and moved on.

And this was the cause of the tensions and the disputes about which St Paul writes. There were tensions around cultural differences. The Jewish Christians held it as very important that their food laws should be obeyed. They would not eat meat sacrificed to idols or meat that was anyway unclean according to their Jewish cultural traditions.

I was once in my early days as a rector of two neighbouring parishes in West Yorkshire that were very different to each other culturally. So there was one church up the hill and they regarded themselves as quite the smart area, the sort of fairly wealthy area. And if we had a bring and share meal in that church, everything was homemade. At the bottom of the hill was another church where the cultural makeup of people was different. They didn't have the same wealth or opportunity. And if we had a bring and share meal there, everything was bought from Morrison's. If we tried to hold a united benefice service with a bring and share meal for both churches, the church up the hill would complain about, we're not eating all that food from Morrison's, and the church at the bottom of the hill would say, we're not eating all that fancy stuff that they make up there, and each church would only eat the food that they themselves have brought. So it's very difficult to create a common unity amongst two very different churches. And that's the scenario that St Paul is addressing, two groups in one church with very different traditions.

So the Jewish Christians had certain food laws that the non-Jewish Christians did not understand, and the Jewish Christians kept the Sabbath day, a Saturday, with all its traditions and rituals, and the gentile non-Jewish Christians did not. And the Jewish Christians and the Gentile Christians were therefore straining with one another as being members of one church. And from St Paul's letter, it seems that the weak that he writes about are those who hold traditions such as food laws and Sabbath days, as if they were of equal importance to faith in Christ Jesus. And the strong about whom St Paul writes are those who, like Abraham, had faith and understood that faith alone was necessary for salvation. Everything else was secondary.

So from St Paul's point of view. It doesn't matter if your food is homemade or comes from Morrison's. The only thing that matters is your common faith in Christ Jesus. It probably didn't help matters very much when Paul called some of them strong and some of them weak - it wouldn't necessarily have poured oil on troubled waters, I don't think. But what he's really saying to them is, be kind to each other, accept your differences, but welcome one another. Don't condemn each other, but look to what you share in common rather than what divides. Because if the Church is going to survive and give witness to Christ Jesus in this Roman pagan metropolis, then you've got to show the world the face of Christ. And the face of Christ is one of welcome, love and acceptance.

But we don't live in ancient Rome, do we? And we don't face persecution like they did, but we do face indifference. There are loads of groups in society that offer wholeness and well-being and friendship and groups that have things in common and make people welcome. So the church needs to be credible in an indifferent world. And we have to be able to say to people, let us introduce you to Christ Jesus and what he's done for us, the love that we share, the friendship that we find, and the welcome that we find because of what Christ Jesus has done for each one of us. No-one wants to come to church and be made to feel unwelcome or criticised for their differences. It's no different today than it was in ancient Rome. The Church, if it's truly to be the Church, will be united when the Holy Spirit makes us one and through us makes Christ Jesus known in the world.

Our Gospel reading tells something of the same story, the same point. In the story that Jesus told, God is the king. Any one of us could be the servant who owes the king everything. The servant owes the king a ridiculous amount of money, millions of pounds, if you like. And Jesus uses that as the illustration of all that we owe to God. We can't possibly repay to God all that we owe to Him from his blessings, the gift of life, the things that we enjoy, our friends, our families, our forgiveness, all those things we cannot possibly hope to repay. But God puts all that to one side and just simply says, you are forgiven, the slate is wiped clean. I love you. It's crazy, reckless generosity on the part of the king, the part of God. So that being so, if we've all received that grace in our hearts, can we possibly treat one another the same way?

And, of course, what happens in the story is that this servant who's been forgiven everything, walks out and finds somebody who owes him just a couple of pence. He doesn't forgive him at all, but seizes him and throws his whole family into prison. And in so doing fails to accept or live out for himself the grace and the love that God has for him.

So when Frederick Nietzsche said, show me that you're redeemed, and then I will believe in your redeemer, it was a challenge. But I think he really wanted to be shown. Maybe he was seeking the answers that a philosopher looks for in life and imploring the Church to show him. Show me that you're loved. Show me what the love of God looks like. Show me what forgiveness looks like. Show me how to live it out and then I can believe it, too, and share in it. And we have those answers. And many people in the world, just like Frederick Nietzsche, are looking for those answers. And we have them. A precious treasure that we, too, can nurture and share to love one another as God has loved us, that we might reveal his glory in the world. In Jesus' name. Amen.