

'Love and forgiveness: a little bit of heaven...in Leeds!'

Sermon for Creationtide 2's theme 'Protecting the Commons'

Romans 14.1-12 and Matthew 18.21-35

What does the phrase 'Protecting the Commons' mean to you? There are a number of possibilities.

If 'the Commons' is the House of Commons, then we know it's pretty well physically protected at the moment...but we also know the building isn't fit for purpose and both the House of Commons and the House of Lords need secure, well-protected alternative places to meet if the House of Parliament is to continue to be its location in the future. Getting that sorted might be a welcome success story after the interminable news about Covid and Brexit...but don't get your hopes up too high to think a solution will be found for a year or two yet!

'Protecting the Commons' could mean something very different for those involved in looking after land. I was fortunate to be brought up in countryside with a lot of common land – heaths and woods all around Guildford in Surrey where, as children, we could roam completely care-free. You just had to look up occasionally and watch out for soldiers jumping out of barrage balloons and floating down on to heath land in parachutes, from 500 feet. The trustees of the Clifton and Durham Downs look after this 'common' land that we treasure as the lungs of Bristol, giving us here in Henleaze some of the best urban breathing space in the country.

'Protecting the Commons', however, is also the theme for this Sunday of Creationtide. And it means something different again from the two possibilities we have explored already. Protecting the Commons in this context is a call to assess how we have nurtured and developed all the resources God has entrusted to the people of the world to share in common – physical and abstract – and how we might develop and improve our efforts in future. It's not a small task, is it!

As ever, we should root our Christian reflection in scripture. The references the lectionary provides for us to do this – Romans 14 and Matthew 18 – don't immediately shout out as being full of Creationtide references...but bear with me, and we could all be in for something of a surprise!

Let's begin by auditing our experience of working co-operatively. What activities, what work have you been, are you engaged in which involves co-operative activity? Education, the arts, engineering, Christian ministry, health care, voluntary work – all involves working closely with other people for a common goal. But then so does being a member of a criminal gang or the Mafia! Clearly, a Christian take on 'Protecting or developing the Commons' requires a good goal as well as good co-operation between those working towards it. And the good goal I offer for Christians in relation to 'the Commons' is 'the full realisation of God's kingdom on earth' – the time and the place where relationships between God and humanity, between humanity and humanity and between humanity and God's Creation will be 'right'. And being 'right' will involve among other things, justice and respect – and maybe more.

In relation to personal experience of explicitly working co-operatively, my mind turns to the Community Organising across the whole of Bristol that my church, St Oswald's Bedminster Down and I, as the Vicar, was involved in back in the early 90's. Some 35 groups – the majority of them Christian churches but also the Hindu Temple in Redfield, the Sikh Gurdwara in Knowle and a Residents Association or two – worked as one unit across Bristol to identify things that would improve life for local people and strive to achieve them. So, as I have described on some other occasions, the first dog poo bins in Bristol were installed in Victoria Park near Brislington, a loud explosion heard across Barton Hill every Wednesday morning at 2.30am was traced to the British Oxygen factory and stopped and people power saw high level meetings with politicians, the police and business leaders across the city, seeking improvements for everyone across the board.

It was demanding, exhausting activity. It depended on a huge amount of one to one and small group meetings with the aim of developing positive, creative relationships. Such work would, I think, be impossible to initiate in today's socially distancing Covid world. But, as those of you who remember me hoping to revive this activity a year or two ago, with supporting Syrian refugees and working on issues of human slavery as two potential areas

to coalesce around, such thoughts have never really left my mind. Cotham Parish Church and St Paul's Clifton both joined the national Citizens UK network late last year – so potential for its revival in Bristol is still around.

What about identifying examples of co-operatives that seem to have a good aim and 'protect the commons' in practice? In the retail world two examples spring easily to mind. The Co-op on our doorstep – and John Lewis / Waitrose not much further away. Do you know how much more than a food store the Co-op on Henleaze Road is? From its and its other branches Community Fund, St Peter's has been able to acquire over £3,000 worth of comfortable chairs and good tables for community use – enabling our monthly Seniors Film Club, for instance, to become a viable, thriving group.

The ultimate example of co-operative, 'Protecting the Commons' business practice I have come across in preparing for this reflection is based in Leeds. Have any of you heard of SUMA – S U M A? Any guesses what its business focus is? Not too surprisingly it's mainly food. Started in the mid-1970's, with a focus on The Good Life and health foods, Suma has broadened its range to include as many ethical, local, organic and plastic-free food and domestic products as possible – and, in the process, has become the independent co-operative with the highest turnover in the country. But get this: it is extremely thorough with its 'Protecting the Commons' delivery. Still to this day, after 40 years working in a highly competitive, results-focused market, all its 170 or current workers get equal pay for their labour and an equal say in the running of the enterprise. All roles are rotated – so that, in a working week, someone might be involved in accounts, delivery, packing and planning on the same or different days. The management is completely flat. There is no hierarchy. All 170 or so partners elect a management committee of 6 and there are co-ordinators for different departments and areas of activity – but everyone is equal. There is, indeed, equal pay and an equal say for all. Does that amount to a glimpse of the kingdom of heaven come to Earth? It does to me – and I'd love to know the reality of the experience from a current partner. If anyone has any leads on that (no pun intended!), let me know.

My guess is that Suma, which is in no way a business with any explicit or implicit connection to Christian faith, has been able to develop and thrive because some of the aspects of 'realising God's kingdom on earth' that we identified earlier. Doing the 'right' thing, seeking justice and according respect: these are all part of the DNA of this secular organisation. And I bet that, given the variety and diversity of personality and talent that there must be among a group of 170 people, two other attributes are part of their life together. One is described in our first reading from Romans 14 and the other looms large in our text from Matthew 18. The first attribute is 'Love for everyone – in their variety' and the second is 'Forgiveness – the ability to have mercy when people don't meet expectations'. Here's a quote from the Wikipedia entry on Suma which has clearly been written by someone who knows the enterprise from the inside:

'Suma has a 30-year history of working to be an equal opportunities employer. It encourages its members and employees to learn new skills, take on new responsibilities and make improvements in working practices. It appreciates the benefits of diversity in the workplace and strives to encourage it.

Since Suma was established it has only stocked [vegetarian food](#), and has a zero tolerance policy to any goods containing animal products or derivatives. Over 30 years later it still sells exclusively vegetarian products and is committed to promoting vegetarianism as an ethical lifestyle choice. Its premises are a meat-free zone, and workers benefit from a vegetarian canteen. Not everyone who works at Suma is a vegetarian.'

Don't you just love that final comment: 'Not everyone who works at Suma is a vegetarian.' That, I think, establishes my hope – that Suma is not a doctrinaire, 'righter than right' clique...but a group of people that appreciate, celebrate and look out for difference, to include and benefit from it within their life.

Truly 'Protecting the Commons'. May we be encouraged by and implement these examples ourselves – and realise God's kingdom on earth more fully as we do so. Amen.