

Sermon 2 September 2018

James 1:1-17 and Mark 7: 1-8,14,15,21-23

Last weekend I went to Greenbelt, a wonderful festival, principally Christian, which explores issues of faith, justice, social action, arts and music. Foundation's service this evening is inspired by Greenbelt and I plan to go. I've been going to Greenbelt since 2005 and I always used to camp, until 5 years ago, when for various reasons I upgraded or wimped out depending on your point of view, and now stay off site in the Travelodge on the A14. Not camping means that I have to drive on and off the site, on tracks across fields, often in the dark. Last Friday night, I drove away from the site in the gloaming. As I got to a field T junction an apparition passed me. It was a double decker bus. Now there is a perfectly good explanation for the bus being there, driving through fields. If you get the train to Greenbelt, you are met at Kettering railway station by a chartered double decker bus to take you and all your camping stuff to the site. This bus was returning to the station empty of passengers. However, it felt a bit like coming across the Knight Bus in Harry Potter. The internal lights were all on, light was flooding out of it. The box on the back where a number would have been, had a revolving red sign saying 'Greenbelt'. And along the side it was advertising a film: The Darkest Minds.

The juxtaposition of the light flooding out of the bus and of the title of the film: The Darkest Minds, seemed to me to sum up much of what is being said in our gospel reading and in the introduction to the letter of James.

Light and Darkness.

Purity and Defilement.

Generosity and Temptation.

I think we can put to one side the details of the washing traditions that Jesus was asked about. What we can notice is that they were not contained within the law that God gave to Moses, instead, they had become traditions that were interpreted legalistically. It is easy to belittle them with our 21st century hindsight, but it is good to be careful, as what we call legalism today was then a genuine effort to apply God's will to everyday life. Christians today add traditions to the essentials of the faith and become troubled or angry if they are challenged or undermined. Examples in our service today may include: Sitting to pray rather than kneeling. Receiving communion standing rather than kneeling. Presenting the wine or water in the wrong order at the offertory. Even lighting candles in the 'wrong' order can upset some, while others are oblivious, never knowing that there might even be a 'right' way to do certain things. If we are not careful, such things become stumbling blocks, acts of purity if done right and acts of defilement if done wrong, niggles that grow out of all proportion to their importance, when in truth what Jesus wants is for us to welcome everyone. To live in harmony, to build one another up rather than build up walls of separation.

Jesus, when explaining his answer to the disciples, says that food cannot defile a human body. What defiles a human are the actions of the heart and mind. It is from them that evil intentions come. And it is also from them that the inclination to generosity, to things that are honourable and just will come. It is from our hearts and our minds that the inclination to let Christ's light of love shine out of us, or to perpetuate darkness will come.

In the letter of James we are encouraged to face trials of temptation or persecution with joy, and I don't think he meant plastering on a mask of a 'happy face'. Did you know that one of the criteria for making someone a saint in the Roman Catholic Church is that they were people who produce joy around them? Holy people who are described as changing the landscape – as if the light had come on?

And so, rather than becoming fixed on the observance of rules, let's look to the ways we can focus on inner purity, on lives transformed from within. What is the root of joy? How do we become generous without putting a price on it, without wanting to retain control in some way of our gift?

We spent quite a few weeks last month looking at the passages that included the feeding of the five thousand and Jesus declaring that he is the bread of life.

Paula Gooder in her book 'Everyday God', looks at the generosity of the small boy who handed over his bread and fish. So often we are encouraged to be sensible about our generosity, to give only if we think it might make a difference. It is worth remembering that God's generosity is immense, and our small insignificant gifts of generosity can mount up as we never know what other gifts they will join or what God will enable to be done with them.

The letter of James encourages us to generous acts of giving. Gifts of time, talent, money, creativity, imagination, hope and encouragement. We have greatly valued the gifts for the Syrian family moving into our neighbourhood and delight in the offers of time and friendship. We are joining Christian Aid in their appeal for contributions towards the relief work in Kerala after the deprivations caused by the monsoon rains. We have a three week course on 'The journey of generosity' starting this week.

Sam Wells in his book 'Learning to Dream Again' connects acts of generosity with the gospel. He reminds us that the gospel does not just belong to us. We cannot put a lid on it, we can't manage it, we can't keep it under control. If we are feeling overwhelmed by what feels like responsibility, anxiety, rules, because we never seem to get things right, or a sense that people are asking more of us than we can give, he reminds us that we can instead be overwhelmed by joy, by grace.

On Monday evening, I was again driving off the Greenbelt site, to come home. And I met that bus again, still with its lights blazing. It made me smile and think about all those wonderful lovely people I have known who are like that bus, where their light shines out, overcoming all the possible deprivations that their minds might have veered towards. People who are overwhelmed with God's joy and grace and who share it with us generously.

There's no great mystery about it. I read an obituary yesterday of a homeopathic doctor who sounded wonderful and who had jotted down her rules of life: worship, be thankful, forgive, help others, persevere, cultivate your soul, stay close to God.

Something maybe for us all.

Amen.

Sarah Thomas 2 September 2018