

Sermon 22 September 2019

1 Timothy 2:1-7 and Luke 16:1.13

I have a long term project – to walk the Wales Coast Path. I started in Chepstow last year and so far it has felt like I've been walking through my childhood. Strictly speaking though, the last four days have been spent walking part of my father's childhood, through Carmarthenshire. I have snippets of memories of his stories – did he and his cousin really cycle to Ferryside to hear Megan Lloyd George speak?

For many of us, the breadth of the gospel stories can leave us feeling we have retained only snippets from our childhood memories. We come across them now as if they are new. We read them, listen to them, with older eyes and ears, with eyes and ears shaped by recent news events and changes in our culture. And they come alive in ways that surprise us.

I suggest that it true for both the gospel reading and the letter to Timothy.

It is surprising how up to date they are, how relevant to our current situation.

Unlike some of the other parables Jesus told, we cannot pretend that this one is a 'nice story about commendable people whom we ought to imitate'. It is also not a story about imitating reprehensible people!

It is worth noting that Jewish culture prohibited lending money and charging interest. It is suggested that the master was avoiding that rule by lending commodities, oil or grain, and charging interest on that. What the steward did was to reduce the debt owed by the borrower to the basic sum borrowed, not charging the interest. That puts the master in a strange position, he cannot complain as that would draw attention to his own malpractice. In fact, he can only admire the steward's clever approach.

Jesus is not commending financial sharp practice. He is not commending supreme self interest or underpinning someone else's malpractice. It's not a piece of moral teaching on how to use or not use money.

Instead it is a warning to Israel. A story that they are failing to live as God's light to the world. That they have become ring fenced by ever more petty regulations. That many of those regulations mean that they are striving for their own holiness, rather than focusing on the kingdom of God.

The part of the steward that Jesus does commend is the part where he aims to make friends. But rather than friends who can offer him homes, the friends Israel should be making are the poor, the crippled, the lame and the blind.

And what does that say to us today?

Bishop Lee yesterday at the licensing service for new LLMs had an interesting phrase. Bearing in mind it was a grand occasion in the Cathedral where everything is done just so, and he often does not do things 'just so' he thanked the Cathedral staff that they show grace when others act with 'humanity, not perfection'.

So often within the life of the Anglican church we seem to look so hard at the rules, working out what is 'right', that we can lose sight of humanity, both within our congregations and outside. We lose sight of the needs of others, and the needs of the world around us. We lose sight of the need to make friends.

The world in which we live isn't inherently bad. It is after all given to us by God and is precious.

How do we care for this world and for those who live in it?

Why has it taken children to tell us that the ways in which the world has been run now means we are sleep walking into disaster?

We can take practical steps, inform ourselves, change our modes of transport, buy fewer clothes, wash them less often, grow bee friendly plants and create havens for wildlife, birds and insects in our own gardens.

We rightly contribute to the work of the Sisters of the Church, we donate to their foodbank, some of us help with preparing food parcels, but have we become a bit too used to the need? How angry are we that there is a growing need for their service and that foodbanks seem to have become 'normal' so that every supermarket has a donation point?

The letter to Timothy tells of another step we can take.

We can pray. We should pray. We should pray for our leaders, for the Queen, for our political leaders, for our MPs and Councillors. We may have done this by rote, we may have thought it props up the status quo, I confess I certainly did when younger. But don't you think that they need prayer? For even if they don't profess a faith, God can work through them, to provide stability and order. And isn't that something that this world needs so much?

And a call to prayer is also a call to think, to think clearly about God's purpose for this world, for humanity. And to speak up for all humanity, when decisions are made that do not uphold the image of God in each and every one. Let us not become complacent. Let us have our eyes opened. Let us be ever ready to revisit the snippets we remember, with eyes and ears that have seen and heard change. May we not be rooted in our childhood memories, but may we be ready to be let the Holy Spirit move us wherever we need to be challenged or comforted.

The words of a verse of one of our hymns at the 10 o'clock service says: Lord, for our land, in this our generation, spirits oppressed by pleasure, wealth and care – for young and old, for commonwealth and nation, Lord of our land, be pleased to hear our prayer.

The word 'care' covers so many things, fear, anxiety, poverty, being different. Last week Mark talked about the human need for order rather than happiness. Maybe that is one of the things we can pray for.

Maybe our prayers can be ones of blessing rather than prayers that criticise our leaders. Blessings are not about rejection, they are not about abuse, they are not about using language to hurt, to call for a defensive response.

Blessings call down the love of God.

John O'Donohue wrote a wonderful book of blessings- Benedictus

I will finish by reading you part of his blessing for a leader.

May we make it into a prayer as we think of those who are in positions of leadership in this country, both nationally and locally.

Sarah Thomas

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