

Sermon 29 May 2022

Acts 16:16-34 and John 17:20 to end.

How many of you were welcomed at the west door last week by a young boy wearing a large 'prayer' hand who high fived you. And how many of you laughed and smiled as you did?

I was there with him, chatting between welcoming, and I was struck that he welcomed everyone, stranger and friend, in exactly the same way. No difference.

I was reminded that I was once a stranger here. As will have all of us. That young boy was brought here as a tiny baby, a stranger to us and probably at that stage also to his parents.

And in some sense we remain strangers. We are never totally known and we do not totally know ourselves. We know more about some than we do of others. Some of us are open books, others prefer to be more private. We smile at each other when we meet outside this place, but may struggle to recall a name or alternatively we know each others' children, grandchildren, spouses, siblings.

Something draws us here, to be part of something beyond ourselves, beyond our family and friendship groupings, to be with people we did not choose to be with.

Jesus' prayer comes at the end of chapter 17 of John's gospel. The prayer is in three parts, in the first he prays for himself, in the second he prays for those who have been with him during his ministry and in this third part he prays for us. By that I mean he prays for all those who did not meet Jesus during his time on earth. For those who have do without Jesus directly showing the way, directly questioning, directly answering questions with another question. We rely on the words written about him, direct testimony, though sometimes differing testimony, of the time he spent on earth. And his prayer is that we might know and show God's glory and God's love.

Church communities are strange places. They attract all sorts of people. We don't join in because we all like doing the same thing – it's not a walking group, a book group, a sailing club. We are here because we are seeking God, seeking something to make sense of this world.

Jesus' prayer is that we will be touched by the glory of God, to be changed by it and to bear it into the world. We might be in the depths of despair, or in the heights of happiness or just stumbling along but we can be endlessly open to be fed by what God wants to give to each of us and to the places where we live and work. George Fox, a founder of the Quakers, said 'walk joyfully on the earth and respond to that which is of God in every human being'.

Respond to that which is of God in every human being.

Last week Helen Collins encouraged us to spend time with those who are unnoticed, unloved, unloveable, or who are simply different from us. I've been reading about a practice of engaging in some way or other with everyone we meet. Smiling as we pass people on the street became standard during lockdown as did having the time to talk to strangers. I had some very profound conversations with people I will never meet again. And we can build

humble and respectful relationships with others. Maybe as an adult find an appropriate way to have meaningful conversations with children; or if young with those of later years; with those born in countries other than your own. Do so simply to learn, to understand life from a different point of view

I'm not a fan of self checkouts in supermarkets. They have their uses but it does mean that there is even less opportunity to talk to people and to give and offer help. Valerie Peters told me yesterday of the young man in the Co-Op who was so helpful as she was choosing her fruit. It is unlikely that she or he will be strangers next time they meet.

Paul and Silas were strangers in Phillippi. They disrupted the balance of power there. This passage tells a story of slavery and of imprisonment, of money and of violence, of abusive relationships. It's astonishing how much is packed into those verses. How the girl is abused and used by people who own her. How Paul and Silas are imprisonable people – strangers who threaten the powerful.

Does the glory of God threaten the powerful?

Does living out the love we receive from God enable us to challenge the powerful where that power is being abused or simply misunderstood?

How can we reflect God's love for the world?

How can we reach those who are profoundly lonely?

Those and many other questions are being asked as we use this season of Thy Kingdom Come to pray for ourselves, our place in Henleaze and beyond. How can we reflect God's love for the world? How do we respond to that which is of God in every human being As you know the church is open most of the time and I would invite you come into church as and when you have time and to use the prayer stations, to take time to simply be and to listen. Several weeks ago Anthea led us in a time of quiet at the end of her sermon to give us each chance to listen to God. What I heard in that time was 'Seek ye first the Kingdom of God'. That chimes with the way we are exploring what God wants from us. So when you pray through the vision of a Community Hub, please spend as much time just being as you do in speaking.

I'd like to end with a poem by Malcolm Guite, part of his dialogue on the two great commandments, Love the Lord your God with all your heart, your soul, your strength, your mind and to love your neighbour as yourself.

This one is to love your neighbour as yourself and it's divided into two parts as an imagined dialogue between us and God. The first part is spoken by us, with a response by God.

Amen

Sarah Thomas 29 May 2022