

## **'The Kingdom in a cup of cold water!'**

Sermon for Trinity 3 by Mark Pilgrim: Romans 6.12-end and Matthew 10.42-44

Lockdown has given us all opportunities to re-assess what is important to us. The threat of severe illness lurking round the corner, able to hit us at any time, has concentrated our minds. Many of us, possibly for the first time, might have thought 'What is truly important to me?' and asked 'What is the most important thing I've done? What, about me, will people remember?'

Living, as we do, in suburban Bristol, not many of us have an international, national or city-wide profile. Other places have famous actors, super-wealthy entrepreneurs, rock stars and royalty – but celebrity isn't really something that Henleaze and its environs goes in for, is it? The go-getters live in Stoke Bishop. The creatives live in Bishopston. Royalty live in Tetbury and the Cotswolds. Henleaze is for the hum drum...the middle rankers who keep the world spinning round once the inventors and innovators have got things off the ground.

What is true of our social and economic life is probably true of our spiritual life too. How many saints have come from Bristol? I well remember giggles in the Cathedral when the Cathedral Chapter, some ten years or more ago, clearly felt a need to burnish Bristol's spiritual credibility. Cathedral congregations ended prayers giving thanks for 'Augustine, Jordan and all the saints'. Remembering Augustine, who landed in Kent and whose monastic order later founded Bristol Abbey was easy. But who was this Jordan we were being asked to celebrate? Was he a Premier League footballer who had suddenly become saintly? Was he a pop star who outshone Aled Jones in praise and song? Not at all – so who was he? The Cathedral believed he was a contemporary of Augustine living in the community which grew into Bristol who travelled with Augustine to meet Welsh Christians at Aust. But even Wikipedia, that fount of all knowledge and wisdom, isn't sure. Some historians claim Jordan was a saint of the late middle ages. The Bristol Record Society back in 1938 reckoned that 'the story of Saint Jordan, disciple of Saint Augustine, may have been invented to give an air of sanctity to what had been the secular land on which Bristol Abbey – which later become the Cathedral – was built'.

So, as I say, Bristol struggles to be a big-hitter in the spiritual heroics stakes. We might have the honour of having the New Room, the oldest Methodist Chapel in the world and John Wesley's home for 23 years at the heart of our city: but given, the fertile ground the Church of England's fearful neglect of ordinary people created for the in-coming Methodist evangelists to rally to their cause, this is hardly a cause for local celebration. We might, however, ironically celebrate the good sense of the local people to follow Christ as Methodists rather than as class-riven Anglicans.

Anyway – can you see that Bristol in general and Henleaze in particular might be like Nazareth for Nathaniel, about which Nathaniel said, in spiritual terms, 'Can anything good come from there?'

Well, you'll be relieved to know my emphatic answer to this question is 'Yes!'

Both our readings this morning give us cause for hope. As Paul writes to the tiny, vulnerable community of Christians in Rome, he emphasises God's grace and mercy to people like us inevitably bound up with human limitations and waywardness. He celebrates the way Christian faith liberates sinful people, including us, to live in the new disciplines of God's kingdom: a servanthood which brings fulfilment and new life through relationship with Christ.

And then there's our Gospel passage. Its two verses – and not ones which get quoted or memorised that frequently – contain within them. I suggest. a huge beam of hope and encouragement. Out of the eighty words in the whole passage, which, I wonder, are the most important? How about the following eight: 'whoever gives even a cup of cold water'? Jesus is referring to something insignificant and mundane. What can be special about 'even a cup of cold water?'

What's special is that Jesus is making points about the grand scale: he's talking about the big picture. A disciple, he teaches, is someone who, because they welcome him, also welcomes God. The heroic prophet's reward, he continues, goes to anyone welcoming a prophet: the saintly righteous' reward goes to anyone welcoming the righteous. It's all heroic, celebrity Christian stuff. But suddenly Jesus 'breaks it down'. He goes from the general to the specific. He goes from the abstract to the practical. He goes from the heroic to the mundane. Righteousness, doing God's will, happens, Jesus says, at the moment someone 'gives even a cup of cold water' to one of life's little ones. Here's a lightly adapted reflection on these eight words and the mundane action they describe from my own theological hero, David Lose:

'We often imagine discipleship as requiring huge sacrifice or entailing great feats, and sometimes that is exactly what discipleship comes to. But at other times, Jesus seems to say, it's nothing more than giving a cup of cold water to one in need. Or offering a hug to someone who is grieving. Or a listening ear to someone in need of a friend. Or offering a ride to someone without a car. Or volunteering at the local foodbank...

Discipleship doesn't have to be heroic. Like all the small acts of devotion, tenderness, and forgiveness that go largely unnoticed but tend the relationships that are most important to us, so also the life of faith is composed of a thousand small gestures. Except that, according to Jesus, there is no small gesture. Anything done in faith and love has cosmic significance for the ones involved and, indeed, for the world God loves so much.

Do you know Loren Eiseley's story of "the star thrower" -- the one about someone tossing starfish after starfish into the sea. When asked why, they reply that if the star fish don't get back in the water soon, they'll dry out and die. Looking at a beach strewn with thousands of starfish, the onlooker remarks that the thrower can't possibly hope to make any difference. To which the thrower says -- and this is the famous closing line -- "To the ones I throw back, it makes all the difference in the world."

Exactly. Because Jesus has promised to come in time to redeem all in love, to fix all damage, heal all hurts, and wipe the tears from every eye, we can in the meantime devote ourselves to acts of mercy and deeds of compassion small and large, not trying to save the world -- Jesus has promised to do that! -- but simply trying to care for the little corner of the world in which we have been placed. And so even a cup of cold water can make a huge and unexpected difference to those to whom we give it and, according to Jesus, such acts have eternal and cosmic consequences.'

So, everyone, be encouraged! In countless and myriad ways, you are making this world God loves a little better, a little more trustworthy, a little more joyful through your gestures of love, mercy, and compassion. There is no such thing as a small gesture of love: through your cups of cold water, through your hugs, through your helping hands, through your listening ears, you are caring for the world God loves so much.

Henleaze and its neighbourhood might not be up there in the list of places linked with world-renowned disciples. It's not Assisi to a modern-day Francis. It's not Norwich to a modern-day Dame Julian. It's not Loyola to a modern-day Ignatius. It's not Calcutta to a modern-day Teresa. But it is where we live. And it is where -- along with the rest of the world - God dwells. And in our small gestures -- even as small a gesture as giving someone in need a cup of cold water - God rejoices and God's kingdom is that little bit further built and unveiled. So let us pray:

Eternal God, that your kingdom may come in a cup of cold water -- we rejoice!

Sovereign God, that your kingdom may come through people living in this neighbourhood -- we give thanks.

Loving God, that your kingdom comes through every gesture of concern we express -- we give thanks. Amen.