Epiphany 7 Year C 2022

Epiphany 7 – goodness! It isn’t very often we get so many Sundays between the Feast of the Epiphany and Ash Wednesday. Has anyone ever spoken to you about why some feasts are always on the same date and others move around? We could perhaps do that one day.

So – today’s Gospel reading – another very uncomfortable text – I was tempted to bring along a bottle of Gaviscon, this text is so difficult to digest.

Once again, as in last Sunday’s reading, Jesus is turning the world as people knew it upside down. We need to remember that Jesus is speaking to a crowd of disciples; this is a continuation of what we call ‘The Sermon on the Plain’, and it is very plain speaking. Last week we heard about blessings and woes; now we have words about general conduct, the way his followers should behave in daily life – this might be good news, but it certainly is hard news, and some people might think it is bad advice. We are to conduct ourselves in a manner appropriate to citizens of God’s kingdom. The first demand of this kingdom is to love your enemy, then to do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you and pray for those who abuse you. How on earth can we do those things? It doesn’t seem humanly possible. Jesus knows that the disciples to whom he is speaking will have enemies, and that they will experience hatred, curses and abuse – just as Jesus will. And those that do all these things will believe they are in the right, that they are acting according to the social norm of the day and in the best interest of the nation – ‘better that one man die’ says the high priest ‘than the people perish’, condemning Jesus to death.

In the OT God commanded that one should love his neighbour as himself (Lev.19:18) which lead to a long debate about ‘who is my neighbour?’ Jesus’ view on that subject gave us the parable of the Good Samaritan. I have often wondered about the man who fell among thieves. Did he remember that, in his need, the priest and the Levite passed him by, more worried about themselves than him? Did he know he had been picked up and cared for by a foreign stranger – an enemy - who not only took him to the inn to be cared for, but also payed the bill in advance? What did he feel like when he discovered that his rescuer was a hated Samaritan? Did he say ‘I’ll never hate Samaritans again’ or was it ‘I would rather have died than accept his help’? *Love your enemies.* The Good Samaritan did all that he could for someone who was not his neighbour; indeed, he was someone who by definition was his enemy. We are back to ‘us and them’, a theme you have heard from me before. ‘Us and them’ – but Jesus says there is no ‘us and them’ – only us, all of us, all children of the one God.

St John tells us that the word became flesh and lived amongst us; God incarnate, God made flesh at a particular point in time, in a particular place – but God still dwells amongst us, for we are the body of Christ. Christmas and Epiphany make a long season when we remember both of those things, and, thanks to St Luke, we have wonderful stories to remind us of them. The Annunciation, the visitation, the miraculous birth of John the Baptist, the birth of Jesus, angels, shepherds – we rejoice in that every year – but do we hold on to these stories as something that happened a long time ago as just that – lovely stories – or do we think – know – that God is still active in time and place, that the Christ who was born in a stable is born daily in us, so that we can live kingdom lives day by day? Jesus says ‘Do to others as you would have them do to you’ - it’s called the golden rule, and you will find it in other faiths and philosophies – but Luke goes further than a tit-for-tat relationship. Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, curse you, and strike you on the cheek. And that sounds like hard work.

Here is the dilemma – how do we move from the natural instinct to match blow for blow and word for word, from reacting with actions and comments that seek to answer hurt with more hurt, instead of living our lives responding with grace and kindness? Jesus tells us to ‘be merciful, just as the Father is merciful’. That is hard work.

It is often said that children who are abused grow up to be abusers; that is the example they have been set, the memory they have. How do we break the cycle? Only by refusing to be drawn into the cycle, and responding to hurt, no matter how difficult it is, with love, forgiveness and mercy – as God does.

On this 7th Sunday of Epiphany the church still remembers (even if by now it is becoming a faint memory) the coming of Christ. From Matthew’s Gospel we have the story of the Magi who made a long journey to see the Christ child (the king of a foreign nation), to deliver their gifts. T S Elliot tells us ‘A cold coming we had of it’ and that ‘this was all folly’, and that afterwards they ‘returned to our places, these Kingdoms, but no longer at ease here, in the old dispensation’. Jesus invites us to move from the confrontational old dispensation into new life, new light, a place where we are much more open to the other, more willing to trust God enough to allow others to be what they are, in the hope (but not the demand) that they too will seek the light. The admonition in Luke to love even our enemies is not just a good idea when we try our best to make it happen, or a call to grit our teeth and make a resolution to be nice to those who are not nice to us. Rather it is a call to live in a way which is contrary to our human nature, a way that follows Christ and is plausible only through the grace and mercy of God the Father. He never said it would be easy!