

I generally experience a shot of excitement at the beginning of Ordinary Time. If that sounds oxymoronic in view of the usual meaning of ordinary, ordinary as in 'ordinary time' simply refers to an ordered, numbered sequence of weeks. And though our spiritual life may go dry from time to time, there is nothing in principle dull about the Christian life even when we have left behind the great feasts of Christmas and Easter and the seasons associated with them, Advent, Christmas and Epiphanytide, Lent and Eastertide. And now, having at the feast of Pentecost aligned ourselves implicitly with the Early Church as it received the Spirit, we find ourselves in *our* time under the challenge of taking forward the Spirit-filled life and mission of that early Church. It's over to us, as it were, to proclaim the message of the Gospel and to bring the message of the God who is Trinity, who is about, who in fact *is*, relationship and love, to a world that needs to hear this good news. We are to be agents of Jesus' compassion as he seeks to reach through us the harassed and helpless crowds of our day, we have been summoned as labourers into God's harvest field, we are the successors of those first twelve apostles and through the Holy Spirit we have authority over the unclean spirits of our age and the capacity to bring healing to the world. We should be profoundly excited by this.

This year as we reach Ordinary Time with its special impetus towards our running with Christ's baton, we find the world dreaming of precisely what we as the Church can offer – change. Covid 19 has engendered a widespread reassessment of what matters in life and a widespread sense that things should be done differently so as to realise, secure and enjoy those truly important things. The massive reorganising of our society in recent months has demonstrated that far-reaching change is actually more possible than it might have seemed – so why not pursue in a spirit of expectation desirable goals in respect of a fairer society and saving the planet from ecological disaster? The world having been turned upside by Covid, it doesn't have to put back as it was with all the problems of that old order. The world can be benignly turned a different sort of upside down – which is exactly what Christians today (just like Paul and Silas in Acts 17) should be about, the transformation of the world into a better image of the kingdom of heaven, a remodelling of the world in accordance with the ways and being of God.

It may be that this sense abroad in the world that things can at this time in history really be made new has given added potency to the Black Lives Matter movement. Toby spoke forcefully last Sunday about the iniquitous impoverishment and deprivation of black lives in this country and the need

for us who are not black to speak out against systemic racism in case our silence should be perceived as mere moral emptiness. Silence, it may well be felt, is collusion in injustice. You may have seen on the Benefice website that the Ministry Team decided to make a statement – in fact, to join others in making a common statement: ‘In case there is any doubt, this book (the Bible, that is) says, Black Lives Matter.’ Yesterday most of the Ministry Team were able to attend the demonstration on Church Green. The high point symbolically was the crowd taking the knee for 8 minutes and 46 seconds, the time it took for George Floyd to die as a result of the knee pressed into his neck. Around this symbolic action, there were moving speeches and some pretty stern admonitions, fuelled by exasperation, by righteous anger, aimed at the mainly white crowd. I found myself applauding strongly the brief injunction from a white speaker that we who might think ourselves clear of racism should make sure to examine our own attitudes scrupulously. I am sure she was right to invite that introspection. Many of us have grown up in a society where racist attitudes and prejudice against other minority groupings were tolerated and we ourselves may have adopted these attitudes unthinkingly. We have the power to eradicate our prejudices but only if we inspect ourselves honestly.

It’s arguable that Jesus had to work on his own prejudices, work on liberating himself from the racist assumptions of the society in which he grew up. In a way it’s a bit odd to hold a bible and make the claim that there is no doubt this book says Black Lives Matter, when there is so much racism in the Bible. The entry of the people of Israel into the Holy Land is accompanied by severe ethnic cleansing understood as approved of by God. The very idea of a chosen people is racist, and particularly troubling when the implication of the idea is that Israel is more beloved of God than are other peoples. Jesus in our Gospel passage today tells his disciples to ‘go nowhere among the Gentiles and enter no town among the Samaritans but go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel’. It is interesting to register that at no point in the Gospels is Jesus recorded as eating with Gentiles or entering a Gentile’s house, though, of course, he does extend his healing power to non-Jews. By the end of the Gospel, though, Jesus is instructing his disciples to ‘Go.... and make disciples of all nations.’ Now Jesus’ initially keeping himself and his mission at arm’s length from Gentiles and Samaritans might be understood as a strategic decision to do with creating a thoroughly godly Israel that can then enter into its destiny of drawing all peoples to worship the one true God and perhaps Jesus’ resurrection enacted among the Jews is in itself that which will draw all peoples to the God of the people of Israel. Or perhaps

Jesus really had his mind changed, as the encounter with the Syro-Phoenician woman in Mark's gospel (in Matthew it is Canaanite woman) seems to indicate. Jesus initially refuses the woman's request to heal her daughter saying he has been sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel, only eventually to perform the healing – which implies that he was wrong about the extent of his mission.

You can explain this story in other ways so as to save Jesus from realising something new, realising that he had got something wrong – but why should one do that? If Jesus has entered the limitation of the human condition so far as to take our flesh and accept our mortality might he not also reasonably be understood to have accepted the limiting process of cultural formation which he then has to learn his way out of? In this he would be a model for us.

If Jesus is shaped by his culture, he is also under the leading of the Spirit and the Spirit leads him into the truth, just as we, culturally conditioned as we are, are nevertheless led by the Spirit into new understanding. At this moment in time, I'd suggest that we in the Church and others are feeling a movement of the Spirit drawing us powerfully into new truth and so into the shaping of a new social and economic order. We may also be feeling a fear that we shall fail to submit ourselves properly to this drawing as the temptation to recover the way things used to be pre-Covid exerts its power upon us. Prayer to the Spirit to keep us open to learning, to learning about ourselves and our prejudices, about our complicity with systems in the world that are ranged against the coming of God's kingdom, to learning new facts in history, in science (I am thinking about the environment here) – such prayer will help us to submit to the Spirit's drawing. But there is also a prayer to be derived from Jesus' emotional attitude as he looks on the harassed and helpless crowds. Our translation talks of Jesus' compassion, others of his pity but these concepts may not represent the intensity of the original Greek – they are a little calm and smooth, perhaps. *Esplanchnisthe* is the word and it has to do with the bowels, the innards, the viscera. My colleague Joanna to whom this sermon owes a lot proposes the translation gutted. I think we should pray to be viscerally affected, gutted, by the world's suffering, the way people are harassed and helpless – the Greek translated 'harassed' here is probably better represented as 'torn asunder' or 'mangled'. An aloof pity is not what is required but something felt strongly in the gut - a component of which might well be a certain anger. If we can allow the Spirit to keep us sufficiently moved, gutted, angry, as well as open

to new truth, then there is a every chance that change will come and the opportunity created by Covid19 seized.

The Bible does, despite the racism it contains, say Black Lives Matter; it is, after all, a record of changing perspectives on God, of a Spirit-driven development towards truer understanding of the range of God's love. After an internal struggle the early Church did admit gentiles without requiring them to submit to Jewish circumcision and Jewish food laws. What we have been summoned by the Spirit to do is to realise, to make actual in our world, the infinitely extensive loving intentions of `God towards all his creation, and to this end we should be determinedly driving out the demons of hatred and exclusion, healing disease and distress, bringing new life in place of the suffocation of old structures and systems, as we are empowered to do. Oppression of one human group by another has been the order of so many days but the Bible's last words include 'Behold I make all things new' and 'Surely I am coming soon. To which we reply, 'Amen, Come, Lord Jesus' and seek as the Church to create in our world now testimony to the validity of that great hope, prefigurations of the fully realised Kingdom of God in which we *shall*, inclusively, love our neighbour as ourself.

'The grace of the Lord Jesus be with all the saints. Amen.' are the very last words of the Bible. That grace will be with us as we seek to reshape the world for the sake of, as a sign of, maybe as the beginning of the Kingdom that is to come. The kingdom the coming of which we must pray for and work towards with a visceral passion, in all the excitement of this sense of new possibilities the Corona crisis has given us - and of this Ordinary Time when once again in the annual cycle it's over to us engage with the promptings of the Spirit who perfects all works, and have our potential as the apostles of Christ fully realised.