

May I speak in the name of God who is Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

I really struggled with this Gospel reading to get a good handle on it. And I was wondering why, and it is because it's not very neat. It's a rather messy reading.

It's not a story about Jesus, or a parable he told. And you may know how I love a good story. So we're dealing with teaching - fine. That's good.

But, it isn't a selection of specific teaching like, say, that beatitudes or the Lord's Prayer.

It reads as a collection of random metaphors and images. There is the image of:

- the little flock
- the kingdom of heaven
- purses that do not wear out
- treasure
- lit lamps
- wedding banquet
- servants waiting up for their master
- a thief breaking in

I suppose I could have picked one and focused on that... but I like to look at a Gospel text holistically.

And they seem to have been cut rather oddly out of the Gospel. Most Bibles and commentaries insert a natural break with a new heading about halfway through, which would suggest that what we have is the end of one discourse and the start of a second.

So what is the lectionary doing in giving us this text? And how might God the Holy Spirit be speaking to us through it?

Let's start with us: St Mary's church in the Benefice of Witney, called to be a community of mercy and kindness.

That narrows our thinking into the question: "How does this Gospel reading speak to our communal calling to be merciful and kind?"

Let's start with: COMMUNITY

Jesus calls those to whom he is speaking in our Gospel today: 'Little flock'. That made some of the congregation of the 8am smile as they feel very much like a little flock. It seems a very endearing term, and we might be reminded that as a community we are God's flock. Psalm 23 - the Lord is my shepherd - may spring to mind. We are guided by God, comforted by God's rod and staff, as we are led down valleys of death to green pasture and clear waters.

We may also be reminded of Jesus in the John's Gospel when he is: "I am the Good Shepherd." His sheep know his voice when he calls them. And as God's flock, we can be assured that it is God's good pleasure to give us the Kingdom of God.

Earlier in Luke's Gospel, the Kingdom of God is said to belong to the blessed poor. And, this comes soon off the discourse where Jesus teaches his disciples to pray: Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. We are a flock who are seeking God's kingdom.

That bring us to: CALLED

There are certain expectations that come with being part of God's flock. And there are some instructions. Have lamps lit. Be dressed for action. Make purses that do not wear out.

These are all very active things for us to do - being a disciple of Christ is not a passive enterprise, and there is no retirement from the service of God.

But these flow out of two distinct instructions, and these bring us onto:

MERCY and KINDNESS

Sell your possessions.
Give alms.

Oh no! The priest is talking about money!

Well, yes and no. There is always the risk that we begin to theologise our way out of commands to be generous with our money and possessions.

But equally, an exploration of the Greek expands these verses and uncovers greater depth to them.

Let's start with SELL POSSESSIONS.

My go-to Bible scholar suggests that 'sell possessions' might be better understood as 'barter possessions'. And what this does is it stops the 'sell possessions' being about an ascetic lifestyle that few could ever achieve - especially in our western capitalist society. Instead, we receive a glimpse into a way of living as a community.

Our possessions become less our own as we become prepared to share. It's not an act of blind, passive charity. It's about community, and our possessions become less our own as we enter a sphere of life where we are happy to exchange and reciprocate with one another according to our own needs and the needs of others.

It is similar with GIVE ALMS.

The root of the Greek word for 'alms' here is strongly entwined with the concept of 'pity'. And this is not to be understood as patronising, but rather in the classical tradition that is associated with our gut - with our ability to feel each other's pain.

Giving alms is to do with empathy.

This is really exciting, I think.

These instructions are not about beating ourselves up about how we don't give enough to charity. But we are also called to be generous financially. I'm not saying we shouldn't be.

Instead: it is an instruction to see the humanity in each other and to respond out of a place of mercy and kindness.

Suddenly this Gospel reading becomes everything to do with being a Community Called to Mercy and Kindness.

Luke has a heart for the poor and the marginalised. It is the backbone to his Gospel, found in the words of Mary's magnificat, his collection of blessings and woes, his naming and raising up of women.

And this is born out of the faith into which he was brought up. All through the Old Testament comes the call to the people of God to care of widows and orphans, to welcome the foreigners, to raise up the oppressed. It is part of our identity as the People of God.

And here we are challenged to live out the call to build the kingdom by acts of mercy and kindness - by acts of seeing the humanity in others.

And this might seem like a nice easy thing to do.

But I am telling you that there are horrors taking place around the world and here at home where brothers and sisters - in whom we should be seeing the face of our dearly beloved Christ - are being de-humanised.

The dark turn that the United States of America is taking is a terrifying indictment. We see their President calling hispanic immigrants 'vermin'. Families ripped apart as parents are encamped and their children left alone. The racist gunmen who shoot down the innocent, built up by vile rhetoric.

We can see it in Russia and the Baltic states where members of the LGBT+ community are hunted down and killed, because they have been de-humanised.

And while such atrocities may not be apparent here at home, we must be vigilant because the toxic conversation surrounding Brexit and our politics has given rise to an increase in hate crime directed towards racial, gender and sexual minorities. And we must be ready to respond.

Jesus calls us to be ready. To keep our lamps lit.

Earlier Luke records Jesus saying that we must keep our lamps out to illuminate the whole room, not to hide them under a basket. Today, we are told to keep our lamps lit.

We pray to be equipped by the strength of God's Holy Spirit to always see the humanity in those around us. To denounce those who would dehumanise them. To stand up and to love - not passively. But with action.

We are called to be a community of mercy and kindness.

It is a good vision for us.

But it is so much more than a collection of nice words and ideas.

It cuts to the core of what it means to be Christian in this very day and age.

Brothers and sisters. Little flock.

Be ready.