

## **Trinity 17, St Mary's**

**26.09.21**

May I speak in the name of God: our Mother/Father, Christ & Holy Spirit. Amen.

I confess that I smiled as I read the reading from Numbers. The Israelites are actually harking back to their time spent in *slavery* in Egypt as though it were a golden era! I smiled because this tendency to wish for what we had before seems to so typify human nature: the grass is, after all, always greener on the other side. How fickle human nature can be.

In the midst of this rose-tinted longing, is Moses: burnt out, exhausted from feeling that he has carried the Israelites as a parent carries a child and so utterly sick of the whining and complaining that he even wishes to die! It is, simply, too much.

Of course God is, and has always been, relentlessly creative so, rather than let Moses die, God just tells Moses to gather 70 elders together and, we are told, takes some of the spirit from Moses and gives it to the 70, who then prophesy. Problem solved.

It's at this point that we come across the next insightful glance at human nature as we hear of Eldad and Medad prophesying in the camp, much to the disapproval of Joshua, who tells Moses to stop them. But Moses' response is to say that he only wishes that *all* God's people were prophets and that God would put God's spirit on all of them. Don't be jealous for my sake, he says to Joshua!

In Mark's gospel, we see this same behaviour reflected by John, as he tries to stop someone who isn't a follower casting out demons in Jesus' name. Jesus responds in a similar way to Moses: 'Leave them be. They won't be able to speak evil of me once they've performed a

deed of power in my name.' It's like saying, 'Once they've seen the results, they'll be converted anyway.'

Jesus then says that wonderful line, 'whoever is *not* against us is *for* us.' I love the *freedom* of that. It stands in such stark contrast to the controlling boundaries we see in the behaviour of Joshua and John.

The truth is, we can't control *everything*; we *need* others, or we end up burnt out like Moses. As I read the rest of today's gospel, with its stark warning about stumbling blocks: cutting off hands, feet and eyes or anything which causes us to stumble, I began to wonder whether one of the greatest stumbling blocks the church faces is this guarding of boundaries and the almost obsessive worrying about who is in and who is out, or who *should* be allowed in and who *should* be kept out.

It happens at so many levels within the church: local, national and individual. We see it on the local level every time we hear things like, 'but we've always done it this way,' or, 'that's my seat,' or, 'we've already got enough helpers.' It's there every time someone feels they're not welcome because of their inconvenient disability, their 'noisy' children, their sexuality, the colour of their skin.

It's between churches too: whenever we treat Christians from other churches with suspicion or spend our time justifying why we're right and they're wrong.

And at national level it's prevalent too: it's why *so many* people have to fight *so hard* to be treated as equals, whether that's due to their gender, sexual orientation, skin colour, disability, or anything else.

What is it which leads us to build and guard our boundaries so tightly? Boundaries can be a good thing, a really good thing, an honouring of self, but these aren't healthy boundaries, these are boundaries set in place to control and keep people out. Is it fear?

Jealousy? Low self-worth? An inability to know fully that we are honoured and loved by God, to understand that someone else's enthusiasm or skill or gifting or even just *presence*, does not make *us lesser*? Perhaps it's all of those things.

So how do we combat this fear, this jealousy and insecurity, which leads us to construct and then guard our borders so fiercely? How do we combat it in our churches, whether at local or national level? How do we combat it in *ourselves*?

Maybe compassion would be a good place to start: compassion for that which keeps us *trapped* within the fear, the jealousy, the low self-worth; compassion for that within us which hasn't yet fully understood that we are enough just as we are, that we are all loved equally. Compassion, mercy and kindness for ourselves and for others.

The letter of James gives us a further suggestion. In his letter, James says:

“Therefore confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another, so that you may be healed.”

Perhaps it's time to be more open about this very human tendency to keep tight boundaries around the things we hold dear. Holding ourselves to account and acknowledging our behaviour is crucial for the journey to redemption: only when we face the music can we begin to compose a new tune. Perhaps it's time to confess these tendencies and to pray for one another so that, in the words of James, *we might be healed*.

And as we pray for healing and compassion, for mercy, kindness and new hearts, let us turn our gaze to CHRIST, the one whose 'yes' was all embracing, to the whole of creation. Richard Rohr talks of 'Christ consciousness'. He describes it in this way:

"At the hour of creation, there is a unifying heartbeat. One word for it is CHRIST. It includes everyone. It excludes no one. Christ is not Jesus' last name, but the blueprint for all of reality."

Elsewhere he says this:

"Everything visible without exception is the outpouring of God."

I wonder what our lives would be like, what our hearts would be like, what our churches would be like, if we could understand and hold fast to this truth that CHRIST is *in all and for all*, that CHRIST includes everyone and excludes no one, that we are *all* of equal value because we are *all*, from the beginning of creation and with the whole created order, an outpouring of God.

Perhaps if we could inhabit this truth, or allow it to inhabit us, we wouldn't need to guard our borders or boundaries, and nor would our church communities. Instead, as individuals and as churches, maybe we could just rejoice in and support each others' gifts and enthusiasm, knowing that we are all of value and that, in those words of Jesus:

"Whoever is not against us is for us."

A final thought: when Moses reached exhaustion point, God's solution was not just to appoint another two or three workers, but *70 others*. In God's plentiful harvest and with all that we are given to care for on this great earth, *many, many* more workers are needed.

So let us always endeavour to cut out the stumbling block of closely guarded borders and the fear, jealousy and insecurity which initiate and protect them. Let us do this with compassion, mercy and

kindness, acknowledging and confessing our behaviour and praying for healing.

And as we pray, with our hearts turned to Christ, may we know and understand that each one of us is precious, loved and worthy in God's sight; may we be aware that in God's harvest and in this great creation of which we are a part, many workers are needed and may we remember that CHRIST includes everyone and excludes no one. In the words of Richard Rohr, let us re-learn:

"To see Christ in everyone and everything."

Amen.