

Epiphany 6 – Sermon on the Plain

We Anglicans and Episcopalians are normally pretty good at being both/and relatively comfortable at living with mystery and paradox.

On the other hand, we're not so good at the more binary either or – which in the increasingly non-binary world we are living in may be regarded as something of an advantage.

From almost the very outset Anglicanism was about seeking to find the middle way between the Roman Catholic Church and Calvinism. It didn't want to be pigeonholed in a particular box – and still doesn't to this day.

So today's readings bring us up with rather a start, or they should, because they are most definitely binary. Jeremiah tells us Cursed is the one who trusts in man and then goes on to say but blessed is the one who trusts in the Lord. The first will be a bush in the wasteland, the second a tree that never fails to bear fruit.

In Psalm 1, the psalm for today, the psalmist uses almost identical imagery for the one who trusts in God, while the wicked are heading for destruction.

And in our Epistle reading Paul tells us point blank that the Resurrection happened, it's a reality whether we believe it or not, and he isn't going to brook any argument about it. If it didn't take place, he says, then we are all wasting our time because clearly life wouldn't have conquered death and all Jesus' claims about God and himself would fall to the ground smashed to smithereens.

And then the Gospel – Luke's version of the Sermon on the Mount. Of course, the key difference is that while Matthew gives us multiple types of people who will receive God's blessing, Luke's Sermon on the Plain, on the other hand, makes a clear and deliberate distinction between blessings and woes.

And the problem with that is that for most Christians in Britain and the Western world is that we are more likely to be on the wrong side of Luke's divide. Relative to much of the rest of the world, we are rich, we are well fed, we have more to laugh about than to cry about. Most of us, by and large, are spoken well of.

So what's going on here? Well, for a start, I would like to suggest that these readings collectively remind us that there are things we just don't understand. But of course, ever since the Enlightenment we have lived in a world where things can't be real or true if we can't explain or understand them.

There is apparently a myth that when a stringed instrument such as a harp or violin or a cello is played well, the instrument itself improves. Now I say myth, but despite tests, the

theory cannot be proved or disproved conclusively. What this suggests is that there is more to reality than we can always measure.

Jeremiah tells us that the human heart is above all devious and perverse. Who can understand it, he says. Human intentions, human compassion can only take us so far. Faith calls us to reach out beyond what we feel and what we know.

The same with Paul's exhortation to the church in Corinth. He talks of the necessity, yes the necessity, of Jesus resurrection for our lives to have any meaning at all. Yet science would have us believe that physical resurrection is impossible, so what made absolute sense to Paul becomes a stumbling block for us even though we recite it weekly in the Creed. Humanism and science make it so much harder for us to accept the idea of a God who is beyond our understanding.

Yes, we can learn much about God from Scripture, but the Christian faith is about far more than intellectual understanding, it is also about what we experience. It's not just about how Scripture applies to our situation today, but Scripture is also the place where we can encounter the divine for ourselves.

Because what the resurrection of Jesus tells us is that the final word of God is Yes, Yes to his creation, Yes to us, Yes to you, Yes to me. Which means that when we fail, that when we foolishly put our trust in man, we can still rely on God's Yes to heal us and restore us.

So we would do well to ask ourselves regularly just what Jesus' resurrection, God's yes, means to us as we go about our daily lives.

Let me turn to our Gospel reading, which on the face of it isn't very encouraging at all for many of us in our relatively comfortable existences.

Jesus has just come from the mountain where he had been praying, he has just chosen the 12 apostles from among all his followers and here he was, through God's power, healing all those who had come for healing from disease or to be cleansed of impure spirits. I wonder how many of those who came forward were prosperous and well fed. Not many I suspect.

In this passage Luke couldn't make Jesus's preferential bias towards the have-nots as opposed to the haves, the world's most desperate people who have nothing to fall back on, not those with a decent pension and a good network of family and friends to fall back on if needs be.

We can't get away from the fact that he does say woe to you who are rich, to you who are well fed, to you who laugh, to you who are well spoken of. In terms of the world as a whole, that's us. So how can we sneak into the blessings column and out of the woes column?

So let me say what I don't think this passage means.

I don't think Jesus is telling us to deliberately seek out poverty, to starve ourselves, to seek out misery to the point of weeping, to behave in such a way people hate us, insult us or trash our reputations. Far from it, he doesn't glamorise poverty and he spent the morning healing all the sick who were brought to him. As far as Jesus is concerned, it's just a fact of life that most people find life pretty hard one way or another and it's therefore natural that that's where most of his care and attention should be focused. And it is also true that most of us do not live in a state of permanent blessing or a state of permanent woe. We invite blessing every time we yearn for God, and we invite woe when we relapse into a state of self-satisfaction.

So, I think it is no accident Luke situated these words on the plain. We are all in this together, both blessed and woeful, both saint and sinner.

So, what does it mean? Perhaps it might make more sense to us if we look at the word woe slightly differently – same pronunciation, but with different intonation and a completely different meaning.

Whoa there, as a rider might say to their horse. Whoa that's plenty when someone puts too much of your least favourite vegetable on your plate.

In other words, stop, slow down, look carefully.

That puts these warnings in a different light. Because what I think Jesus is trying to say here is this. The poor, the hungry, the weeping, the hated, the marginalised, the abused, they know they need God, they hunger for God and God hears them and will respond.

Equally, those of us who are rich, well fed, happy, well-spoken of, may easily forget that we too need God, may forget that all our blessings come from God, and think instead that our good fortune comes from our own efforts. Whoa, says Jesus. Stop, think again, because if you continue to think like that then your long-term future is pretty bleak. What you have right now will be as good as it gets.

In other words, our actual material blessings can get in the way of our much more necessary spiritual blessings

You who reckon you are at the top of the pile, you need God as much as these people who are regarded as being at the bottom of the pile, Jesus seems to be saying. If you don't recognise that then not only will their world be turned upside down for the better, so will yours be, and in your case, it will be for the worse. As Jean Vanier said repeatedly, he received far more from the people he looked cared for than he ever gave them. We need to humble ourselves and realise how much we have to learn from those God pays special attention to.

So, we are not to tolerate the wealth gap, the hunger gap, the education gap, the health gap, the overarching privilege gap. From our position of privilege Jesus is calling us to take

action in the best way we can, whether a lot or a little, to close those gaps. The poor and the marginalised can't afford to wait for God's kingdom, they need help now.

How we contribute is up to us. It may be giving money to charity; it may be volunteering on the Care Van. It may be putting some food in the Food Bank baskets the supermarkets put out, it may be helping someone learn to read or a refugee to speak English.

There's a ton of different ways to help reverse the fortunes of those who have little or nothing, to bring blessings to them now rather than at some indeterminate point in the future, we just have to decide how we can best help.