Sermon

Epiphany VII Yr C

24/2/19

Eltham

**Readings**

Genesis 45 – Joseph’s reunion with his brothers

Psalm 37

1 Corinthians 15:35-48etc resurrection mystery

Luke 6:27-38 Measure you give is the measure you get.

+FSHS

A couple of weeks ago I went to a live podcast where one of the speakers/comedians was talking about her consultancy work. She’d been invited to address a team in an organization. When she arrived at the office, the liaison person said to her, “Tracey is the team leader and she’s a complete bitch who’s nasty to everyone all the time. Always tears people down. But she’s also the person who gets the most clients and clients love her. We don’t understand it – but you need to know, because she’s likely to diss everything you say, and she’s super competitive with other women.” The speaker said she went into the board room to meet the team, trembling in her boots, and sure enough, Tracey stuck out her hand with all the charm of snake. The speaker said, “Hello Tracey, it’s good to meet you. Mark has told me so much about you, and about how you’re the most valuable employee in the organization.” What do you think Tracey did? She melted, and the speaker was easily able to work with her. It turned out that no one in the 10 years she’d worked there thought to offer Tracey a compliment or gratitude for the work she put in. When someone said something kind and appreciative to her, she opened up like a flower, and new life and energy flourished in and through her.

What’s the point of hearing this story today? Because it’s an illustration of what Jesus is preaching about in his sermon on the level place in today’s gospel reading. (Level place = world, coming down to our level, in the midst of the ordinariness of life, transforming into God’s realm.) What we heard is familiar in many ways because similar sayings are in the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew. But it has a typically Lukan twist. Do to others what you’d like them to do to you. Oh, you love your family? How nice, so do the rest of the world. You do good to those who do good to you? Great. But that’s easy; that’s what the world does. I’m telling you: love your enemies and do good to those who hate you. Do good without expecting a return, and be generous just for the sake of it, not for any thought of gain. What you give to others is what you’ll get back yourself.

We hear those words and maybe we think piously we live up to them, or they make our eyes glaze over because of course we do that, and the words lose their impact. But Jesus here is basically saying, think of the best thing you could do for the worst person you know, and go do it. Think of what you’d really like someone to do for you, and do it for them. Think of people you’re tempted to be nasty to, and lavish generosity on them instead. This is crazy, stretching stuff. Can you imagine it? (Paranoia – the next time someone is kind to you, what’s really going on here?) He says, do this, be merciful, because God is merciful to everyone. God is like this: God is abundant, exhuberant, joyful generosity, to a fault – this is grace (and any of us who know our own hearts and are honest with God about them will agree that God’s mercy and grace are mindblowing). Be like God: be abundantly, exhuberantly, joyfully generous.

Does that sit easy? Not really. Because let’s be honest: we all have different pictures in our heads about what God is like. Don’t spend more than you need. We can’t afford that. Oh my, look at how those people have wasted their money! They should have saved it or given it away! Look at how that person is dressed. Why has that man made those stupid life choices? Or, the internal litany that goes with it: you’ll never be good enough, never beautiful, skinny, talented, or rich enough. What were you even thinking, putting your hand up to do that? All of these very sad, judging, condemnatory thoughts and attitudes reveal gods or images of God that are stingy, mean, punitive, judgmental, and downright nasty. Fair’s fair: you scratch my back, I’ll scratch yours – and God is quid pro quo… If you do the right things, say the right things, then God will do right by you. We all tend to make God in our image, because it suits us that God is like us because God can then be controlled by our limitations.

But the God Jesus embodied is, as CS Lewis once said, the great iconoclast, breaking every mold, every image we could make of God and what God is like. God cannot be contained by our limited imaginations. Jesus is saying, “Your God is too small!”

If people truly took these simple instructions seriously, if just a handful of those here, those in our sphere, started to live as though God is crazy abundantly generous, with a wild kindness that thrills to give, to show mercy, to forgive… it would transform our world. If everyone were to believe in this God, there would be no violence; people’s first concern would be how their neighbor is doing, rather than possessions and power. There wouldn’t be divisions of class or caste; the voices of those who are voiceless would be heard and valued; the voice of the earth would be heeded. Life would be exhuberant, astonishingly lively, different. It would in the words of the song we sometimes sing “attract and scare”, and perhaps there would be some who stare and then ask the reason for the joy and hope within us.

Jesus lived this life, embodied the realm of God, God’s presence, God’s life and is-ness. People stopped and stared. And others were so scared they tried to snuff it out – and through all of it Jesus never stopped forgiving and loving his enemies – because that’s what God is like. That’s what living God’s way looks like.

I don’t know about you (though I might hazard a guess about some), but I know I’m a long way from living the wild generous, forgiving, giving, joyful, abundant mercy and grace Jesus embodied. The image of God Jesus shows forth is one that challenges the way I think, the kinds of thoughts I think, the words I say, the things I feel, the actions I take both for myself and towards others. There is no part of life which is not challenged when brought into the sphere of Jesus, the realm of God. It is just as well (thank God) that God is abundantly merciful, because we are in need of that mercy and grace in our failure to live God’s way. And even in that last sentence, God’s not interested in our failings, failures, but in stirring up in us abundant life, catching us up into the dance of God’s realm, healing, forgiving, and in the power of the Spirit, helping us to become more like Jesus in living God’s abundance.

I wonder whether, in this week ahead, we might put into practice this crazy generosity of our God. One small thing. Maybe we do think about the one person to whom we’d most willingly do nasty things – and instead do the kindness, most generous thing we can think of. Maybe we choose to forgo the negative judgmental inner talk – or instead of judging what others are doing, saying, wearing, look like, choosing, praying for them. Maybe, where we are habitually stingy, we do something extravagant with the intention of expressing God’s generous, abundant love. Maybe we make a small choice not to worry, or a big choice to forgive. Whatever it is, may we all pray that this God Jesus embodied, and whose realm he gave his life to inaugurate, may cast down the idols we have made for ourselves – those nasty, stingy, punishing, or indifferent, absentee, generalized images of God – and instead inspire us with the joy, abundance, generosity, forgiveness and mercy of God’s presence. And so in transforming us, transform our world.

Lord, teach us to pray.

The Lord be with you.

**And also with you.**