Sermon

Epiphany V

16/2/20

Eltham

**Readings**

Deuteronomy 10.12-22

1 Corinthians 3:1-9

Matthew 5.21-27

+FSHS

Whenever in human communities we start dividing into camps pitted against each other, you can guarantee anger isn’t far away. And it’s easy when we’re angry, instead of getting savvy and directing that energy constructively towards action to change a situation and to champion justice, to start running people down and painting them with tar which we can later set on fire (we think) with a lit arrow like in the movies. To do as much as we can in our anger to discredit them, to undermine them, to dismiss them, to establish the righteousness of our own position at the expense of their’s, to blame, to name and to shame, and even more, to claim the status of divine mandate for what we think and believe. I’ve been guilty of this – as have most of us in different situations, because it’s a very human way of responding to situations where we feel deeply hurt, especially when our identity (and our survival) is at stake. It’s a classic human behaviour to claim allegiance as part of a tribe: what was a useful evolutionary function for physical safety continues to lead us to “other” those who differ from us, and to bolster the “us” vs the “them”, because “we” have a truth which sets us apart from “those others” and which keeps us safe and favoured by God, while “they” are way off beam, walking the path that leads to hell forever. Maybe that’s a bit of hyperbole, but you know what I’m saying. You know what I’m saying because the church has been doing this for a couple of thousand years and there is nothing new under the sun in human behaviour. Today’s readings stand in rebuke of anger which tears others down, and of this pattern of othering and alienating those who differ from us. So I am preaching to myself, as well as to you, and it’s a message that it’s critical we all hear. Because many challenges lie before us this year in which we may find ourselves at odds with each other over issues that touch on our identity and self-understanding. And there’s a big question at stake around how we can be together while disagreeing profoundly – and still love one another.

I wonder what it was like to be in the Corinthian churches and to hear Paul’s words. He calls the Corinthians: “You big babies” (which more closely translates the Greek than the NRSV’s polite “infants in Christ”). They thought they were being super-advanced super-spiritual Christians by claiming allegiance to Apollos, to Paul, to Christ, claiming a monopoly on truth as opposed to those “others” who were less spiritual, less favoured, less Christian. “You big babies!” Paul says to them. Grow up. The wisdom they thought they had was “fleshly” which in Paul means that which is opposite to the way the Spirit works. Or: using evolutionary patterns of othering in order to feel safe. Already and as we heard last week, Paul’s pitted God’s superceding wisdom against such foolishness: the ultimate foolishness of the cross. God’s power is shown in self-giving, in refusing to let fear lead or govern, in the ignominious and torturous death of God’s Son on the cross, not in lording it over others as the Corinthians were doing (and others... like the Philippians to whom Paul specifically wrote “let this mind be in you, the same mind that was in Christ... who emptied himself”). He points to the jealousy and quarrelling among the Corinthians – the very fact they were dividing into factions – as evidence of this babyish and immature outlook. They are seeing the nature of leadership in the church in the wrong light: it’s not about gurus to follow, or one being better than another. In fact, Paul says, all those who are church leaders are *diakonoi*, servants of a greater purpose, and all have their role to play. Apollos planted seeds for faith, Paul came along and watered the seeds. But ultimately it’s not Paul or Apollos who made the seeds grow; God is the one to whom the field belongs, who made it, made the seeds, the sower, and the waterer, and God is the one who makes the seeds grow. That’s the focus the Corinthians should have: this is the path of spiritual maturity, to recognise that all have gifts to offer for the collective good of God’s people, no one gift more important than another, all vital to growth. When all those gifts are working in together, the life of the Spirit is present, released in each to multiply God’s people and along with them the gifts they have to offer. Everyone belongs. How dare anyone suggest that someone should leave, or that someone else is not worthy to be here. Because they too have a gift they contribute, the gift of difference (hard though that may be to accept), as well as the personal gifts the Spirit may have given them for the good of all and the growth of God’s people.

And more than that. Behind a lot of claiming of positions, the sort of argy-bargy the Corinthians were engaging in, is often anger, fear, mistrust – all that which destroys community. Jesus has some pretty strong words to say about such things. Last week we noted the challenge of Jesus’ extreme words in the Sermon on the Mount. Today we hear more. His hearers apparently thought they were doing pretty well on this observing the law thing: not committing adultery, not murdering, giving their wives a nice, neatly drawn up certificate of divorce, fulfilling the vows they’d sworn in a timely manner. Jesus hasn’t come to overturn the law, but to point to true righteousness – which is not in fulfilling a set of obligations, but is about the alignment of the heart with God’s desires, and acting from that alignment. So, murder is extended to being angry with a brother or sister, and to calling them names. Being angry with someone and calling them names he suggests is judged with the same or greater severity than killing them. Committing adultery is extended to even looking at someone and imagining whether they’re good in bed (and note that the fault is with the luster rather than the one being lusted over). Divorcing a woman is as bad as committing adultery, and forces her into adultery (because in those days women were vulnerable and if divorced had few other options than remarriage or prostitution). Swearing a vow is outright transformed into not swearing vows at all, but being straightforward in our yes meaning yes and no meaning no. All of this, because what Jesus is pointing to is the sinew of relationship between, the warp and weft of the fabric of the community of his followers. Serious consequences flow – Jesus calls it judgment – for those who destroy community, who think they’re performing the law to the T, but whose hearts are mottled and sick with anger, lust, selfishness, and dishonesty. The ultimate judgment is shared responsibility for the breakdown of the community of God’s people by refusing to own our anger, lust, selfishness, dishonesty and so on. Jesus gives the remedies: for anger – going to the person we’re angry with and seeking reconciliation; for lust – keeping our eyes and imaginations to ourselves; for swearing – being simple and honest in our speech and saying what we mean. Doing this is about loving neighbour as we love ourselves, and in that loving action, God’s love is manifest and the realm of God grows.

Paul’s and Jesus’ words directly rebuke us when we stand in angry defiance of an “other” – whether a group “they” or a person with whom we disagree. I wonder if Paul standing on the floor of our synod last year would have called us all “big babies” for engaging in the violent “othering” methodologies of the world. Because it’s not about what position we hold or even why we hold them, dearly and deeply held though those positions are to us. It’s about power, and about a failure to remember that the one in whose power we are is that same one who gave his life for the life of the world. And that is the pattern, the way in which we need to, we have to, engage those who differ from us: a willingness to lay down what we are and who we are for them, to step into their shoes and to seek to understand, to have compassion, to move beyond our difference, to learn from it – for difference is a gift. That sounds nice. (say it again) But it’s actually one of the hardest and most costly things we can do. As costly as owning our part in an argument, and seeking and granting forgiveness. As costly as guarding our hearts and our eyes and our ears and our lips so that what comes forth from us is not a lusting leer, or an insulting jeer, but honour and courtesy. As costly as honesty in a world which encourages dishonesty, and where lying is easy. As costly as seeking to learn the value the other’s deeply held conviction holds for them when it seems repugnant from our point of view. As costly as refusing to let our anger and fear govern our lives, and instead channel the anger into peace-making action for justice, and transform the fear into radical trust and dependence on God. It’s on this cost that community is built; God’s building cannot be built without such self-giving love of one for another. If instead of letting our anger and quarrelling tear another down, what if we chose to show them honour? What if we started out by honouring those around us for their willingness to lay down their lives, their dearly held positions, the sharing of the gifts the Spirit’s given them, for us, and for the chance to understand and come alongside us? What if instead of standing in our own righteousness, we chose to let it go in order to understand and be with those who differ from us? What if we started to remember that we are called to serve one another as Christ has served us? That’s the kind of righteousness which exceeds that of the Pharisees and Sadducees. Because that is the righteousness of the realm of God – or the life of the Spirit – at work in us and through us. And it is through this kind of self-giving love we will find our hearts beating alongside God’s heart for the world.

The Lord be with you.

**And also with you.**