

Third Sunday after Pentecost

Early Christianity was mocked as being a religion for women, children and slaves; those who contributed to society but had no intrinsic honour. Women could rise to power in Roman society through money and political cunning – but due to their gender were second class. Jewish society was even worse. If we look through the Old Testament – women were generally considered as possessions. The beautiful story of Jacob’s love for Rachael was that, even after being tricked into marrying Leah, he continued to ‘work’ for Rachael. She was earned. Now I am not trying to cast moral aspersions here – to judge an ancient culture by our cultures standards is wrong and anachronistic. We must always remember that when studying ancient history.

However, the reality of ancient Judaism was that women were loved possessions, to be looked after and owned. There is a disturbing section in Kings where the price of rape is named – which is different if the women as a virgin, married or still belonging to her father. If a young woman was raped who was not betrothed – the rapist was obliged to marry her. While in Ancient society this could be seen as doing the young woman a favour because she was now ‘unmarryable’ and the man was now responsible for her wellbeing – modern culture would shudder at such a proposal. I doubt there is a parent in this room that would see that as appropriate action after their daughter’s rape. We are very blessed to be living in 2013 where injustices are exposed and women and children are equals.

Jesus does not buy into the social ideals at the time. Women were a part of Jesus’ original retinue and were the only ones present at the Cross. A woman, even though she was not a valid witness, was the first to witness the resurrected Christ. I think that Jesus was trying to send a message. Remember, with every story about Jesus comes a profound truth, beyond the literal, about the nature of God. What is being revealed here?

Remember what previously happened. We have Jesus teaching on bearing good fruit, loving enemies and non-judgement. What I didn’t tell you is that this all flowed from Luke’s sermon on the plain. The Beatitudes in Luke 6.

Then he looked up at his disciples and said:

‘Blessed are you who are poor,
for yours is the kingdom of God.

‘Blessed are you who are hungry now,
for you will be filled.

‘Blessed are you who weep now,
for you will laugh.

These Beatitudes or ‘Blessings’ stem from the moment Jesus entered public ministry after the temptation in the desert and he entered the synagogue on the Sabbath day¹⁷ and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written:

¹⁸ ‘The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because he has anointed me
to bring good news to the poor.

He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives
and recovery of sight to the blind,

to let the oppressed go free,
¹⁹ to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour.'

The good news to the poor and the marginalised was that God has a special partiality for the poor, the victim and the outcaste. So much so that God made flesh lived with the poor, the victims and as an outcaste – an itinerant/wandering preacher. This message to the dirt-poor Lukan community gave them hope. Though they were living in poverty and all of the health and educational advantages that poverty brings – God honoured them.

A more correct reading of the Beatitudes or Blessings is to read it through an honour and shame motif - 'How much honour have you who are poor,

for yours is the kingdom of God.

'How much have you who are hungry now,
for you will be filled.

'How much honour have you who weep now,
for you will laugh.'

Which brings us to today's Gospel. A woman – a widow whose only son has died. The son is referred to as a man so we can safely assume he is at the very least 12 or 13 years old. Without her son, the widow has no one to look after her in her old age and no one to give her a voice in society. The loss of her son is not only tragic from the point of view of losing her child – which is hard enough, but the repercussions for her future would have meant that this woman would have had to rely on the kindness of strangers and her community for the rest of her life. She has lost what little control and independence she had left.

Jesus heart was filled with compassion. Remember the more correct reading of this would be Jesus heart was wrenched from his chest. It is a powerful word. Do not weep he said. He touched the young man's death bed and said 'rise'. The young man spoke and Jesus then 'gave' him to his Mother. Do not weep.... Blessed are those who weep now. How much honourI wonder if she laughed in joy when her son, her beloved and her voice in the world, was returned to her?

The people glorified God and said that God has looked favourably on them. We are shown a God who loves the marginalised. Who loves the victim. Who blesses and gives honour to those that we would rather cross to the other side of the road than look in the eye.

The marginalised make us feel uncomfortable. The poor and sick make the rich and healthy feel guilty. How many times have you, seeing a homeless person, avoided eye contact? Why? Is it shame? Do you feel powerless to help? Do we not trust those who find themselves on the margins and question how they brought it on themselves? Or do we conveniently forget our Christian duty and the love that God has for these people?

You are not alone, we have all done it. The question is – have you ever reflected on this reaction knowing God's love and partiality for them? Have we convinced ourselves that God wants us to be fat and happy and that is what being a good Christian is about?

No. It is about how we live and love in the world. It is about what wrenches our heart from our chest that we are compelled to give life and hope to a situation that is voiceless, marginalised and stinking of death. Because we know and have experienced the love of God and we should be the light that

brings hope into other people's lives. This is our Christian duty and the only appropriate response to the love, compassion and grace that we have felt in our own lives. The love, compassion and grace that brings us together here today as the tangible face of Christ in the world. We are not Sunday Christians – we are followers of Christ every day.

So what does that mean? It means that when people wonder where God is in this world of weeping, poverty, illness and famine and ask 'Where is God?' they can point to Saint Paul's Ashgrove, The Anglican Church of Brisbane, The Anglican Church of Australia – indeed the worldwide Christian Church and say 'There He is. There is the real tangible face of Christ in the Community – and they are making a difference'.

This is hard, Jesus shows us that. But the life that it brings to others is beautiful and it is God at work. So are we complicit when we see the marginalised being further marginalised around us? Are we voiceless when the voiceless are persecuted in our society? Who are the victims and the voiceless in our culture? Or are we the face of Christ – who are moved by powerful compassion and give life and love to those who need it most?

Galatians Commentary.

Paul is setting the scene for the theological arguments to come. He speaks of his conversion experience and his 'metanoia' which is sometimes used synonymously with 'repentance'. 'Metanoia' is a 'change of heart that is ongoing and active'. 'Metanoia' is not a one off where we change our hearts and minds on issues or our own behaviour, but it is everyday active reflection and dedication to a discipline of living. All Christians are called to change their hearts everyday – especially on issues that persecute, oppress or bring about hate. Christianity is inherently political because it involves how we live our lives, how we treat others and the dignity that we give both those around us and those who are far away out of sight.

Paul talks about meeting the 'Apostles' or 'The Twelve'. There were more than twelve Apostles – however 'The Twelve' were given a special place as they were with Jesus from the beginning. Paul never met the living historical Jesus and refers to himself as an Apostle 'untimely born'. Notice the tricky language when Paul refers to James (the main protagonist). Paul never directly acknowledges James the brother of the Lord as an Apostle. Paul uses the term apostle with the utmost regard. It is a title that he seems sensitive about – perhaps because he was a persecutor of Christians and feels unworthy. He calls other apostles 'Super Apostles' and down plays his own significance. Paul is a master of rhetoric and this could be a technique to show his humility. He does not boast in his own actions, but of the suffering that he has undergone on behalf of Christ.

Anointing of the Sick.

One of the five commonly known as sacraments – should not to be confused with the last rites. The Anglican Prayer Book has a beautiful service that has anointing for any who are sick and want prayer. The anointing is symbolic of the Holy Spirit and it is supported by scripture. The Epistle of James places great importance on the Christian, as someone who should visit the widows and anoint the

sick. For the writer of James these actions are the lived grace that we are given by God through Christ. It is interesting that we would rather make sure that our children get to their sporting games or ballet than to teach them the importance of compassion and looking after those around them. Are we teaching our children the importance of 'self' or the importance of caring for others?

One of the most transformative experiences for me as a child was when GFS would regularly take us to the Prince Charles hospital to sing for the sick and give pastoral care. This stuck with me more than any swimming lesson and taught me how to live and love in the world. How do we love those around us – especially those who are out of sight?