

Sermon for Seventh after Trinity, 2021

Sirach 27:30 - 28:7. Ephesians 4: 25-32. Psalm 85:1-6.
Matthew 5:20-24.

The Collect: God, forasmuch as without thee we are not able to please thee: mercifully great that thy Holy Spirit may in all things direct and rule our hearts; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, Amen.

Sirach 28:5 ‘If he himself, being flesh, maintains wrath, who will make expiation for his sins?’

During the week the argument about ‘taking the knee’ rolled on. It heated up when England defender Tyrone Mings criticised the Home Secretary, Priti Patel, for stoking the fires of racism by failing to condemn those in the crowd who booed when the team ‘took the knee’ before the start of a football match. Ms Patel had said this action amounts to gesture politics. Like Mings, she herself had been the target of racial abuse. Why would he not empathise with her rather than criticise her? Or vice versa? Maybe she is more aware than he is about the nature of insidious power invested in salutes, whether they be Marxist in origin, or National Socialist? But, what we are witnessing in examples of such gestures is virtue signalling. But, how much virtue must we have before we can presume to signal it? ‘Who will make expiation for *our* sins?’

Sadly, those who do signal have little understanding of the virtue they are signalling. ‘Taking the knee’ achieved fame (or notoriety) when it was introduced at the start of a US football game in 2016 by a black player called Colin Kaepernick during the US National Anthem to protest against racism and police brutality against black people. However, it has also been associated with Martin Luther King’s invitation to pray at rallies in the 1960s. Of course, Catholics think of it in the context of genuflecting before the Holy Sacrament. It can be a sign, of prayer, of subjugation to a monarch, of respect, of intention to pray, and, currently, of solidarity with black people who are oppressed. The study of signs is called semiotics. It is complicated enough to be taught to degree level in universities. But, a sign differs from a signal in that the latter demands action.

Who would think that gestures could be so complex? Well, those who look deeper than surface level! The trouble is, signals grab attention very easily. In the book of Daniel 3:6 it reads: ‘Whoso falleth not down and worshippeth that same hour shall be cast into the midst of a burning fiery furnace.’ Indeed that happened to Meshach, Shadrach and Abednego. There are consequences for those who don’t react appropriately to the signal given to the crowd; as Priti Patel and others find out. Much worse has befallen people in the US where refusal to ‘take the knee’ has led to beatings and death. The Bible, unlike the manifesto of Marxists and anarchists, is fulsome and frequent in warning against self-righteousness and mob rule. Sirach: ‘Anger and wrath, these are abominations, and the sinful man will possess them.’ Ephesians: ‘Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamour and slander be put away from you with all malice, and be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you.’ Matthew: ‘I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.’ If you want a secular analysis of the power of crowds to affect the behaviour of individuals, you can read Douglas Murray’s book: *The Madness of Crowds: Gender, Race and Identity*.

Our first reading today was from Sirach/Ecclesiasticus, and this literature is very similar to the Book of Proverbs. It opens with the assertion that all wisdom begins with the Lord, and to fear him leads to glory and exaltation. Nowadays, the problem is that very few in an unchurched and secular society, have been taught to consult the Bible as their primary source of wisdom. They prefer to consult Twitter, and TikTok, or so-called ‘Influencers’ (mainly very young people with little life experience, but oodles of money supplied by advertisers who get a mention on their internet site). To them, it is of prime importance to be liked, even adored. They want to *feel* good, and to be approved of: ‘liked’ and ‘friended’ in a ‘virtual’ though not *virtuous* way. Who of us wouldn’t want to be liked? Perhaps there are some who genuinely couldn’t care less what other people think, or don’t have the psychological capacity to process emotions in the usual way. But most want to be seen to fit into the mores of the time.

Yet, it has to be said that the Bible, at least in today’s readings, is so challenging that only Jesus could ever live up to them. We heard last week that even the wisest people in the Bible failed to live up to God’s standards. Which human has never forcefully expressed wrath? Very few, even Saints, have been perfectly tranquil and tolerant. How many have felt the desire to wreak vengeance on someone else for being cheated or slighted? Who has not coddled enmity between themselves and a former friend? Where is the man or woman who hasn’t lied or presented a false face to preserve their own self-image? When did we act against the commandments, taking the Lord’s name in vain, or stealing, or some other transgression? When did we go to bed seething, and wake up angry? What about letting evil talk come out of our mouth? It’s not good for edifying and imparting grace? A forensic examination would provide evidence to convict us, probably on more than one count. Being human, we are prone to failure. But we are also subject to forgiveness, under the grace of God in Christ. Notice we are ‘subject’ to forgiveness. We can’t pronounce ourselves guilt-free. Our salvation depends on ‘taking the knee’ not to an ignorant mob, nor to a self-righteous ego; but to God Himself.

Sirach asks us to reflect on the fact that a man can be merciless to another, and not recognise his own sinfulness. He expects healing for harbouring anger against another, when, in reality, he has been picking at self-inflicted sores. Sirach, though wise, doesn’t know that the Messiah will come and make expiation for the sinner, but, accidentally alludes to this. ‘If he himself, being flesh, maintains wrath, who will make expiation for his sins?’ Sirach states here that a person can’t make a sin-offering sacrifice in the temple, and nobody else can do it for him, not even the priest, if he is still maintaining wrath. So, in Sirach’s understanding repentance hasn’t occurred, and the sin cannot be expunged. We, as Christians, know that, in the final analysis, sin clings to us, despite our best intentions. We need a Saviour, a Redeemer, who will do for us what we cannot do for ourselves. Yet, we should aspire to do all the things St Paul tells the Ephesians. Jesus warns in St Matthew’s gospel that we can’t try to signal virtue like the scribes and Pharisees, but it won’t get us into heaven on its own.

So, brothers and sisters, when we bow the knee to Christ, we don’t signal our own pretended virtue to other people, but to acknowledge our dependence on Him. The result of this submission to Him, means life for us, and for others - life expressed through grace from above, not woeful ignorance below.

In the name of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.