

Sermon for Nineteenth after Trinity, 2021

Jeremiah 17:12-14. Acts 10:34-43. Psalm 103:8-14.
Mark 2:1-12.

The Collect: Lord, we beseech thee, absolve thy people from their offences; that through thy bountiful goodness we may all be delivered from the bonds of those sins, which by our frailty we have committed: grant this, heavenly Father, for the sake of Jesus Christ, our blessed Lord and Saviour. Amen.

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

Mk 2:5 ‘And when Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralytic, “Child, your sins are forgiven.”’

Before the BBC got overtly propagandist, and Nick Robinson’s self-righteousness exceeded that of the scribes and pharisees, I used to listen to the Today programme most mornings. One week there was an intermittent humming noise in the background. The presenter pointed out that this was due to refurbishment of the building. The sound of drilling resonated throughout the structure. It was a little distracting, but not half as much as the constant interruptions that the presenters made, stopping the flow of the argument of any guests. In fact, there is a web-site that goes by the title ‘Is the BBC biased.’ There is another called ‘BBC Watch’. You can check statistics which prove that left-wing guests were interrupted much less frequently than the more conservative ones. I suppose the word ‘ensorious’ applied to the presenters. Well, I got so fed up with this that I changed to Radio 3. There the music tends to have intrinsic merit, though the ‘woke’ targets set by editors now insist that at least a couple of composers have to be black and female in each segment. All told, broadcasts have become media for disseminating rectitude as they define it. We used to pride ourselves on the fairness and veracity of British Broadcasting. But, I suppose we can’t expect it to have more than a veneer of neutrality, as they it is not produced in a vacuum. Media is the product and means of exerting power. But it is not free in its distribution of forgiveness.

‘Woke’ proponents do not allow the possibility of forgiveness for those who they deem to be enemies of their code. But, is this any more inexcusable than religiously-based violent opposition to freedom of opinion? An example of this intolerance would be the case of a teacher in a Batley School who showed the cartoon of the prophet Mohammad to his class. It provoked a national debate, yet, as far as I know, he is still in hiding and has not returned to teaching. Once again there is no forgiveness given to someone labelled a sinner. Recently, a Messianic Rabbi, Rav Porat, was speaking to a well-known Orthodox Rabbi (Spiegel Amsalam) near the Kotel (the plaza near the Western Wall in Jerusalem). Having recognised Rav Porat, Rabbi Amsalam threatened that if the Messianic Rabbi didn’t leave, a crowd would be summoned to eject him. Worse than this was the threat to have him killed. Why, because he was speaking to people about Yeshua. Bravely, Rav asked Spiegel whether or not it says in the Bible that it is forbidden to eat meat and milk together (Exodus 23:19 interpreted)? Rav pointed out that Abraham, who was acknowledged to be a righteous man, had offered God milk and meat together, yet his act of hospitality was accounted to him as righteousness (Gen 18:8). (See this exchange on YouTube here: www.youtube.com/watch?v=1OnXjUl6bs). So, even today, heated argument threatens to descend into violence. One person believes he speaks with authority, another challenges this at their peril. But, the claim to speak *with* authority can be false, and may need a gullible mob to enforce it.

How different is this to Psalm 103:8 ‘The Lord is full of compassion and mercy: long-suffering and of great goodness. He will not always be chiding: neither keepeth he his anger for ever.’ God is the author of authority! ‘Like as a father hath compassion upon his children: so hath the Lord compassion upon them that fear him.’ These words seem to get buried by human wrath. Empty religion shovels earth on truth that sinners want to bury.

When Jesus was back in Capernaum where he lived, somebody told the other villagers who then quickly gathered at the house to listen to him preaching. The crowd got so large that a number of desperate friends dug an hole through the roof-tiles in order to get their paralysed friend down to Jesus. Jesus saw that they had faith (and not a little ‘chutzpah’). In our gospel we read: ‘And when Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralytic, “My son, your sins are forgiven.”’ ‘Now some of the scribes were sitting there, questioning in their hearts, “Why does this man speak thus: It is blasphemy! Who can forgive sins but God alone?”’ Did they not believe God can forgive, or, rather did they reserve absolution to God alone? What did they think sin is? Simply, in Jewish belief, sin is not *doing* the right thing. Once done it has to be undone, not ‘unthought’.

Now, what is the problem here? If we are scribes, students and teachers of the Bible, we want to know whether what we witness has scriptural warrant. Our question might be: ‘What can we *do* for this paralysed man?’ Or: ‘What does it say in the Torah about confirming the healing of a paralytic?’ After hours of research, discussion and opinion, we might conclude that *we* can’t do anything, but God can. We also believe that the man is paralysed because of sin: his or his parents. So, it can take several sessions to conclude what the man must do to be healed. Again, only God can forgive the man. How can the man counteract the paralysis-sin by an opposite action? These scribes know only what they have learned from their training and life experience. They are stuck in a mind-set. In principle, God can forgive, and God can heal. But they wrongly conclude that Jesus has committed blasphemy by pronouncing sins forgiven. Notice that they weren’t sitting discussing things with each other. Mark stresses three times that this was an internal struggle with their reasoning and emotions: they were questioning in their hearts, questioning within themselves, question(ing) thus in their hearts. The Holy Spirit prompted Jesus to bring their internal struggle into the open. Their inner struggle contrasted sharply with the faith of the friends of the paralytic. The friend’s struggle had been with the roof and the crowd!

Brothers and Sisters, after the healing, the man took up his bed and walked, and ‘they were all amazed and glorified God, saying “We never saw anything like this!”’ Ultimately, a struggle is going on at various levels. That struggle threatens to paralyse each of us, and to deny us the offer of healing and forgiveness. We are confronted by self-righteousness people who assume that everything they think and do is perfect. We are confronted by crowds of gullible followers of false creeds and we only disagree on pain of ostracism and violence. We are confronted by self-appointed interpreters of religion or atheism. One religion even commends that its followers struggle and strive; the word in that religion is ‘jihad’. Jacob wrestled all night with the Angel of God, and lost! The reason is that we want to overturn the power imbalance between us and the Almighty. Why so much struggle? Because many have not accepted the authority of Christ Jesus. And, if they don’t, then healing and forgiveness cannot flow into and through us. When we do accept His authority, we are amazed, and glorify God. Then we see and understand the source of miraculous things. Then we recognise the authority of God in Christ to forgive His children.

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