

The 19th Sunday after Trinity

Collect: Faithful Lord, whose steadfast love never ceases and whose mercies never come to an end: grant us the grace to trust you and to receive the gifts of your love, new every morning, in Jesus Christ our Lord.

Isaiah 45.1–7: Thus says the Lord to his anointed, to Cyrus, whose right hand I have grasped to subdue nations before him and strip kings of their robes, to open doors before him — and the gates shall not be closed: ² I will go before you and level the mountains, I will break in pieces the doors of bronze and cut through the bars of iron, ³ I will give you the treasures of darkness and riches hidden in secret places, so that you may know that it is I, the Lord, the God of Israel, who call you by your name. ⁴ For the sake of my servant Jacob, and Israel my chosen, I call you by your name, I surname you, though you do not know me. ⁵ I am the Lord, and there is no other; besides me there is no god. I arm you, though you do not know me, ⁶ so that they may know, from the rising of the sun and from the west, that there is no one besides me; I am the Lord, and there is no other. I form light and create darkness. I make weal and create woe; I the Lord do all these things.

Psalm 96.1–9:

- ¹ Sing to the Lord a new song;
sing to the Lord, all the earth.
- ² Sing to the Lord and bless his name;
tell out his salvation from day to day.
- ³ Declare his glory among the nations
and his wonders among all peoples.
- ⁴ For great is the Lord and greatly to be praised;
he is more to be honoured than all gods.
- ⁹ O worship the Lord in the beauty of holiness;
let the whole earth tremble before him.

Gospel: Matthew 22.15–22: Then the Pharisees went and plotted to entrap Jesus in what he said. So they sent their disciples to him, along with the Herodians, saying, ‘Teacher, we know that you are sincere, and teach the way of God in accordance with truth, and show deference to no one; for you do not regard people with partiality. ¹⁷ Tell us, then, what you think. Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?’ ¹⁸ But Jesus, aware of their malice, said, ‘Why are you putting me to the test, you hypocrites? ¹⁹ Show me the coin used for the tax.’ And they brought him a denarius. ²⁰ Then he said to them, ‘Whose head is this, and whose title?’ ²¹ They answered, ‘The emperor’s.’ Then he said to them, ‘Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor’s, and to God the things that are God’s.’ When they heard this, they were amazed; and they left him and went away.

Reflection:

Last week we had the parable about the man who was not suitably dressed for a wedding banquet. He is revealed as a fake; there under false pretences. A hypocrite. Pretending to be one amongst the many invited but coming only with his own selfish and separate agenda.

In the parables we do find the use of embellishment and exaggeration to make a point but though the background to the writing of Matthew’s Gospel was a time of intense dispute, this analogy of a man being thrown out of the wedding banquet into outer darkness does not fit easily with the bigger picture we are given by Jesus of a loving and merciful God, of God reaching out in love. What we can say is that this strange analogy is being used to make firmly the point that the hypocrisy of a leader can be dangerous and this includes religious leaders. How making a pretence of faith is wrong and Jesus wants to show up the consequences of the attitude and actions of hypocrites. This is something we find in many of the parables.

And so following on from the telling of that parable it comes as no surprise that Matthew writes once again about the religious leaders who, out of hypocrisy, are trying to trap Jesus. And they do this with their hidden agenda by posing to him a series of contentious questions. These leaders act as though they are special and chosen by God but surrounding Jesus are the crowds, the many who are called. The many, the young, the old, the poor, the excluded, the ones the Pharisees blindly assume have very little to commend themselves and whose faith and really important questions, they do not take to heart, ignoring those who are the ones who are responding to Jesus' message of radical hope and transformation.

So who might we need to listen to today? Those on zero hours contracts. Those in relatively low paid jobs paying back their student loan, including nurses and teachers. Those for whom being furloughed has not been an option. All those who struggle because of the ways in which we have not sufficiently valued the contribution of all our citizens. And alongside, and just as important for us as a faith community to listen to, those whose spiritual well-being is not being met or whose faith is not being nurtured.

Returning to the passage today we find Jesus commanding the positive role of the state to use a fair system of taxation in meeting the needs of all the people. His words silence the hypocrites who, like the man thrown out of the wedding banquet, suddenly find they have nothing to say. He also challenges them to take up their responsibilities, for all the decisions that they make that affect others but for which they are not open to scrutiny.

Later we will find Jesus himself largely silent when he is arrested and facing unjust charges. His though is a different kind of silence. The silence of waiting on God, of not jumping in too quickly with a personal solution and the silence of bearing pain unjustly placed on a person which cannot be easily articulated. So instead we find the need to wait for times to change, for the right word to be spoken at the right time and the making of a decision and taking action that brings real hope that broadens, opens up and extend God's kingdom.

Where might we need to be speaking out? In the workplace, in a trade union, on a parish council, on a school council, on the PCC. Are we asking for a more radical vision for the future? One that for churches will be in partnership with others who are like minded, that is more bottom up than top down, one that gives more attention to the climate and environmental crisis, to the consequences of social and economic deprivation.

In his parables we find Jesus turning round the conclusions of much of the old Deuteronomic religious and world view. He tells instead parables about the land being given over to others, not out of a punishment but this occurring because of the selfishness and idleness of those who for too long have assumed an air of privilege and whose lives are not open to scrutiny.

The response of the Pharisees in Matthew 21 when Jesus asks who the future will now be given over to was to talk about God exacting revenge, but Jesus says no, God's way is not revenge but will be seen to come through as people find and live in different ways. "I am interpreting this for you" he says, in the words of the parables and through my death. Jesus the living hermeneutical key, Jesus the interpretive lens who teaches and shows us how we can unlock a fuller understanding of God being at work in the world and in peoples' lives.

However, because relationships were broken and reconciliation lacking, people did continue to see external circumstances of violence as God's will and sometimes the writer of Matthew's Gospel seems to confuse us by doing this himself.

Perhaps there has been a time when something went badly wrong, something bad happened and we might have thought of this or interpreted this as God's punishment? Jesus seems instead to ask of us in these times to try to think in a different way, to allow God to surprise us so that we do find new hope, new meaning. To recognise the way in the past that we have seen things or others have led us to see things might need to change, and that our understanding of God can be re-framed.