

silence, love and understanding

a sermon preached on the
seventh sunday after pentecost

27 July 2014

at

st john's

ANGLICAN CHURCH CAMBERWELL

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the lections: Genesis 29:15-28; Psalm 128; Romans 8:26-39; Matthew 13:44-58

Today's reading brought me to reflect on three things – silence, love and understanding.

The reading from the letter to the Romans led me to think about the impact of silence, or more rather, those moments which render us speechless. Recently, the world has been faced with a number of situations which have the power to render us speechless. The senseless loss of 298 lives onboard MH flight 17, shot down in Ukraine, the escalation of tensions and conflict in the Holy Land, continuing violence, wars and conflict in Syria and the Middle East, and in North and South Sudan. We are left wondering “why?”, and with the awful truth that over centuries, and over millennia, humankind has never been able to find lasting peace.

In these awful events we are faced with the cruelty of humankind, cruelty against one another, cruelty which seems to be never-ending. Violence on such a grand scale, the suffering of innocent people, including children, the targeting of places of worship and medical facilities shakes us to our core.

Amid all this, you'd be reasonable to wonder either what we should pray for, or what use our prayers might be. What words can we use in such moments to express what's in our hearts?

The passage from the letter to the Romans speaks to those moments which render us speechless. It reassures us that, when we cannot find the words to express our grief, our sense of loss, and our concern, the Spirit knows our hearts and minds and speaks for us.

Prayers do not need words. To pray, we don't need the right words, spoken in the right order and with a level of eloquence and propriety. We don't need words at all. What we need is our hearts. Our hearts speak for us when our minds are at a loss, and God, who knows our minds and our hearts through and through receives our wordless prayers. After all, the language of prayer is the language of love.

Today's passage from the Gospel of Matthew describes the Kingdom of Heaven through a number of parables.

From the examples of the treasure in the field and the pearl of great price, we can learn that the Kingdom of God is worth anything to attain, worth any effort and any

price. But with the third analogy, that of the net thrown into the sea which catches every kind of fish, it seems to strike a different note with the figures of the angels who will separate the evil from the righteous.

To me, this seems to be taking things too literally. These things work best when looked at as an analogy, and the thing we need to do with analogies is to interpret them, and reinterpret them. Rather than establishing the Kingdom of God as a place where only the good, the worthy and the righteous will be received, we can reframe the idea in the knowledge that through Christ, God has been reconciled to all, in love, and all are made worthy of the Kingdom of God.

Rather than being a judgemental text which divides, which ostracises and excludes, this text then becomes a text through which God's love is shown, God's mercy is celebrated, and all can find peace and welcome, knowing that the Kingdom of God is open to all.

This openness is counterpointed by Jesus' experience in his home town. The final moment of the Gospel sees Jesus teaching in his home town, but the people are astonished, and cannot take him seriously. It's easy to imagine then turning to one another and asking "How can this man, full of wisdom and teaching us here, be the little boy who grew up among us? The man whose entire family we know, and have known for years!" This is a perfect demonstration of the common saying that familiarity breeds contempt.

But Jesus' response, to me, holds no contempt for the people who would not hear his teachings and learn from him. Quite the opposite. Christ's declaration that 'prophets are not without honour except in their own country and in their own house' speaks to his understanding. He sees their reactions not as a rejection of God, but that they could not hear God's word from him, someone whom they had known so well.

So he continues on his journey of teaching and preaching, understanding rather than being angry, leaving to travel to places where his words would be heard and welcomed. So even in the face of rejection and criticism, Christ offers compassion and understanding, constant in his love for all he encountered, meeting them where they were, and not judging them for where they weren't.

In conclusion:

As Christian people, today's readings teach us three valuable lessons – that our silence can speak louder than our words, that the love of God welcomes all into the kingdom of God, and that our responses to those around us should be based on understanding and compassion, and in each of these lessons stands the Christ, willing to teach us, guide us and inspire us as we live out our faith.

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