

Trinity 17 2018

Chichester Cathedral Sung Eucharist

James 3.13-4: 3.7-8a

Mark 9. 30-37

Even at my age, I continue to acquire Godchildren. A few weeks ago, I was invited to take on my eleventh! You see, I just can't resist them. When I am asked, I go all gooey-eyed and just cannot say "No" to being part of the life of a small child and watching him or her grow up.

So, as you can imagine, I can identify with Our Lord, in this morning's Gospel, taking a child in his arms: surely one of the moments when we see the incarnate word of God at his most human.

But Jesus is not using a child to illustrate his teaching because children are symbols of innocence. Anyway, children can be far from innocent, as we all know. He is teaching about *discipleship*. In his day, children were the least esteemed members of society, they were vulnerable, and it is the least esteemed in society and the most vulnerable whom he is teaching the disciples that they must serve.

At this point in Mark's Gospel, Jesus' public ministry is over. We are told "*...they passed through Galilee. He did not want anyone to know it; for he was teaching his disciples*". In other words, the disciples' private tuition with Jesus had begun. And we are also told that they had been arguing with one another about who was the greatest... And so, once again, Jesus reminds them that discipleship can involve turning the world's standards upside down: "*Whoever wants to be first must be the last and servant of all*". True greatness involves humility.

One doesn't always see people whom the world might call great or important being sufficiently at ease with themselves to show genuine humility, which is

not the same as false modesty or grovelling! In my view, it is certainly a quality possessed by Her Majesty the Queen, and also, I would suggest, the current Pope.

But, you don't have to look very far on the world stage, to see people who seem to show a distinct lack of genuine humility: people who appear to make judgements and even policy not out of humility, but out of shallow petulance: people who hold such power that they could unleash untold suffering and pain on the world at a whim. I am sure that I don't need to name names!

Meanwhile, as they jostle for what they believe to be greatness and massive influence, millions starve in Yemen.

It therefore behoves every Christian to witness to the values of God's kingdom and not the values of so many kingdoms of this world. And we do that by engaging *with* the world, not separating ourselves *from* it and certainly not trying to separate the Church from the world. And engaging with the world... through the values and standards of God's kingdom, as taught by Christ in his private tuition with the disciples. That can sound simplistic, so let me explain exactly what I mean.

As we heard, the first words of our second reading this morning from the Letter of James are in the form of a question: ***Who is wise and understanding amongst you?*** This is followed by an instruction: ***“Show by your good life that your works are done with gentleness born of wisdom”.***

The crucial word here is ***“wisdom”***. So many people who the world calls important these days, and indeed they often deserve to be regarded as important at one level, so many might be *clever*, but perhaps don't always possess *wisdom* in equal measure. There is an enormous difference between the two. And it is the wisdom which comes from God that - harnessed to humility - makes for effective discipleship and enables us to witness to his values and standards.

We learn from scripture that wisdom is not esoteric knowledge, reserved for the few, but can be received by anyone: it is “from above” as James reminds us. It enables us to make well-informed decisions in life, based on the love of God. The Old Testament writers, of what is called “Wisdom Literature”, saw that, in this way, thinking about the created world and what’s going on in it, through the lens of God’s love can become the context (the “place the... “X marks the spot”) in which the divine is revealed and through which we can make informed decisions.

Again, this doesn’t happen because of a great stack of knowledge that we have, but through a *relationship* we have, with the living God.

And so, as we reflect on Brexit, or trade wars and perhaps especially at the times of party political conferences or political ambition of any sort, we can meet the God who is appealing to us through his creation and by reflecting on local, national and global events, we are given the tools to bring a new perspective to events.

I am reminded of that remarkable phrase in Peter Shaffer’s play and film about Mozart – Amadeus – when he is contemplating the way that composers can – through music - music can raise the unremarkable and mundane in life to great heights. He says “*We sacramentalise their mediocrity*”. Of course, the world is already sacramental, a conduit for God’s grace. God speaks to us through people, circumstances and places, and of course through music and they can be changed by God, through us.

But to me those words are a useful metaphor of what happens when we apply wisdom to life.

I believe that we are living in times when sharp choices have to be made between the values and standards of the world and God’s kingdom. “*Show by your good life that your works are done with gentleness born of wisdom*”.

James teaches us that wisdom is received from God through living in the light of Christ. It is remarkable for its non-intellectual character. We often think of wisdom as being about great intelligence. James gives us a rather different view. It is God's gift. It is there for everyone who is open to him.

He also points out that there is another kind of wisdom, which he describes as "earthly, unspiritual and devilish": the point being that such wisdom is *not* from God. And so, central to all of this is the notion that our lives as Christians must be aligned with God, and only God. And ultimately, it is trust in God that drives away things devilish.

And trust in God, as we can see in Jesus with the child, involves a chain of relationships. Welcome the child, the vulnerable, the helpless in Christ's name and we welcome Christ. Welcome Christ and we welcome no less than almighty God himself into our lives.

We don't bring Christ *to* others. He is already there. We serve Christ *in others*. Sometimes missionary activity is conceived as bringing Jesus to a place or a community. This is not how God works in a world that is sacramental, where he is already present. We serve Christ *in* others.

Let us pray for strength – and wisdom – to think more and act more in that way.