

St. Lawrence 4th December 2016

One of the most frustrating and infuriating experiences you have to face if you're at-all involved in being 'up front', public speaking, making public statements, preaching, is when people who have been listening to you have either heard something you didn't actually say, or have misunderstood or misinterpreted what you did say, or have heard and seized on one of the things you did say and entirely overlooked or put at the back of their mind most of the rest. Politicians, celebrities, official representatives of public bodies all know how easily they can be pilloried by the results of that kind of mental process going on in the minds of hearers, whether supporters of their cause or implacable enemies. But it's not only people like us who experience it, sometimes it can be the words of our public worship that can meet with the same reaction.

One of the saddest examples I came across was when I found myself listening to the grief of a young woman who had been to one of our Communion Services here. She had many, many emotional and psychological problems. She disliked herself immensely because of all the things she had done wrong in her life – and there were several – and carried a huge burden of guilt and shame.

She had come to a Communion Service already knowing, as she saw it, that she shouldn't really be there at-all. She had looked around at the folk gathered around her and, as she saw it, knew that we were all good people and she wasn't. She was wrong, of course.

She had tried to go through the words in the booklet she'd been given and they had made her feel worse. Because right from the start we kept reminding God and each other how rotten we are (this happened to be during a period when our Communion Services very strongly tended to keep interrupting the flow to express some form or other of breast beating and expressions of penitence). The crunch had come for her when, just as she had summoned up some sort of courage – or, as she apparently saw it, effrontery – to go forward with other people to take part in whatever we had been invited to share together at the altar rail she found herself once again having to say “ we are not worthy so much as to gather up the crumbs under your table...” - and however true and appropriate that may be and may seem to us, for her it was the last straw. She stayed where she was and before people had got back from their trip to the altar rail, she was gone.

What a tragedy. She had listened, read and followed the words we use so easily and, because of her own state of mind, she had entirely missed that all-important and essential second part of that expression of unworthiness ‘... but you are the same Lord, whose nature is always to have mercy.’

She never came back. When I eventually was in a position to listen to her account I was unable to convince her that she had totally misunderstood the nature of God and of our Gospel.

I do have some sympathy with the way she had reacted to elements of some of our Services. I have myself thought that our Communion Services perhaps sometimes rather overdo the penitence aspects – we just don't seem to be able to let it rest, to accept the absolution and forgiveness already offered, not keep repeating the request for the Lord to have mercy, not accept that He's already done that, however unworthy we know ourselves to be.

Because, frankly, I don't have to be reminded of how unworthy I am. I know that I am not fit for the Kingdom of Heaven. Jesus once said that unless our righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees we will never enter the Kingdom of Heaven. And despite all their faults, the scribes and Pharisees were actually very righteous people – perhaps a bit too self-righteous at times, but, none-the-less pretty righteous people – certainly more righteous than I am. I don't need reminding – I know that I am not worthy of or fit for the Kingdom of Heaven – and I'm not just saying that, I really mean it.

My only consolation is that – neither are you! I don't even have to look around and stare into your face to know that – you are no more worthy of the Kingdom of Heaven than I am! I'm in good company! Not you, not me, not any of us, not even the Archbishops, Bishops not even all the clergy throughout the country at this moment preaching in their Churches – I'm sure you know the old joke about what makes hell 'hell' is that you can't get near the fire for clergy!

But it's no joke. Whatever else is meant by the doctrine of original sin its key observation, confirmed by our own behaviour and failures, is that no one is fit for, worthy of, deserves, merits or can possibly earn the Kingdom of Heaven. And the Good News, the Gospel is that you don't have to and neither do I - because God accepts, welcomes, draws us into his embrace despite whatever we are or are not. That is the essence of the Christian Gospel, that God welcomes and accepts us, as the hymn we sang last week so clearly tells us, just as we are. Just as I am – not as I should be, not as I wish I were, not as anyone else thinks I should be, not even as God might wish me to be – just as I am.

Listen to how the poet George Herbert put it:-

Love bade me welcome, but my soul drew back, guilty of dust and sin;

But quick-eyed Love, observing me draw back from my first entrance in,

Drew nearer to me, sweetly questioning if I lacked anything.

“A guest” I answered “worthy to be here”.

Love said “You shall be he”.

“I, the unkind, ungrateful? Ah, my dear, I cannot look on thee”.

Love took my hand and smiling did reply “who made the eyes but I?”

“Truth Lord, but I have marred them; let my shame go where it doth deserve”

“And know you not” says Love “who bore the blame?”

“My dear, then I will serve.”

“You must sit down” says Love “and taste my meat”.

So I did sit, and eat.

What an incredibly releasing piece of news that is. If only that young woman had grasped that fundamental, essential understanding of the Christian Gospel, of the mind of God whose nature is always to have mercy – what an effect that would have had on her own self-esteem, her inner peace.

Just as you are. That’s the message to take home to yourself from the Gospel of the Lord. Once you realise that, of course, once you know and have taken into your heart and mind the incredible generosity of God who takes you as you are you will certainly want to adapt and change your will and your ways to become much more of what you should be, what others want you to be, what God urges you to be; and you will begin to achieve that through prayer, through bible reading, through worship and Christian Fellowship, through learning about and understanding that Gospel of the Lord.

If only other people could grasp it. What a spring that would put into people’s steps through life if they really knew deep in their hearts and minds that the God who is Lord, Ruler and Judge of all accepts and loves them just as they are, despite what they are.

How can we tell them; how can we convince them; how can we open their hearts to that message.

For most of us, probably not through words. Some of us do have that kind of commission, privilege and heavy responsibility in the way we lead worship, take funerals weddings and baptisms.

For all of us, though, I suspect it is largely through our attitude towards and the way we receive and accept those whom many see as unworthy and unfit to receive love and generosity – the social outcast, the neer-do-well, the not very hard-working, the scrounger, the asylum-seeker, the drug addict, the drinker, the refugee, the inadequate homeless, the selfish. Perhaps if we can really go out of our way to welcome and receive such people - just as they are - we might well be proclaiming through deeds and attitudes rather than through mere words that Gospel of our acceptance by God just as we are.

And then, who knows, perhaps they, like us, might find themselves becoming much more just as they should be