

Readings for the Twenty-First Sunday after Pentecost

22nd October 2023

First Reading: Exodus 33:12-23

Moses said to the LORD, 'See, you have said to me, "Bring up this people"; but you have not let me know whom you will send with me. Yet you have said, "I know you by name, and you have also found favour in my sight." Now if I have found favour in your sight, show me your ways, so that I may know you and find favour in your sight. Consider too that this nation is your people.' He said, 'My presence will go with you, and I will give you rest.' And he said to him, 'If your presence will not go, do not carry us up from here. For how shall it be known that I have found favour in your sight, I and your people, unless you go with us? In this way, we shall be distinct, I and your people, from every people on the face of the earth.'

The LORD said to Moses, 'I will do the very thing that you have asked; for you have found favour in my sight, and I know you by name.' Moses said, 'Show me your glory, I pray.' And he said, 'I will make all my goodness pass before you, and will proclaim before you the name, "The LORD"; and I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and will show mercy on whom I will show mercy. But,' he said, 'you cannot see my face; for no one shall see me and live.' And the LORD continued, 'See, there is a place by me where you shall stand on the rock; and while my glory passes by I will put you in a cleft of the rock, and I will cover you with my hand until I have passed by; then I will take away my hand, and you shall see my back; but my face shall not be seen.'

Second Reading: 1 Thessalonians 1:1-10

From Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy, to the church of the Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ: Grace to you and peace.

We always give thanks to God for all of you and mention you in our prayers, constantly remembering before our God and Father your work of faith and labour of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ. For we know, brothers and sisters beloved by God, that he has chosen you, because our message of the gospel came to you not in word only, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction; just as you know what kind of persons we proved to be among you for your sake. And you became imitators of us and of the Lord, for in spite of persecution you received the word with joy inspired by the Holy Spirit, so that you became an example to all the believers in Macedonia and in Achaia. For the word of the Lord has sounded forth from you not only in Macedonia and Achaia, but in every place your faith in God has become known, so that we have no need to speak about it. For the people of those regions report about us what kind of welcome we had among you, and how you turned to God from idols, to serve a living and true God, and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead – Jesus, who rescues us from the wrath that is coming.

Gospel: St Matthew 22:15-22

When the chief priests and Pharisees had heard the parables, they realized that Jesus was speaking about them. Then the Pharisees went and plotted to entrap him 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. Tell us, then, what you think. Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?' But Jesus, aware of their malice, said, 'Why are you putting me to the test, you hypocrites? Show me the coin used for the tax.' And they brought him a denarius. Then he said to them, 'Whose head is this, and whose title?' 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.

A Reflection for the Twenty-First Sunday after Pentecost

The events that have been unfolding in the Holy Land over the past two weeks have shocked us all. The media has brought us the effects on and the reactions of those affected in graphic detail, and we have heard the views of politicians of all persuasions. It is a tragedy that is the product of a long history and one in which it is hard to see any sort of resolution. Feelings of helplessness and despair come easily, but surely there is a better Christian response.

Of course, there are no easy solutions but let me offer a few thoughts. I'll start with a short story from a completely separate context. I may have told you it before, but it had a profound effect on me.

When I was teaching, one of the courses involved considering the effects of smoking on the human body. In the course of it, I ended up discussing with a group of pupils whether or not they thought it was right that tobacco companies could and did target advertising at children in developing countries when it was illegal for them to do so in this country. There was a fairly lengthy silence and then a voice said 'Why should we care, we don't know them'.

'We don't know them.' I don't think that this particular youngster was especially callous or thoughtless, but I do think he reflected a section of society, perhaps a significant section, perhaps all of us to an extent, which attaches less importance to those we don't know. We would probably all recognise that when something, be it tragic or joyful, affects a person we know, or parallels an experience we ourselves have had, we do feel it more keenly than otherwise. Unfortunately, in the context of the Holy Land, the Palestinian and Israeli people have lived in fear of one another, becoming increasingly separated and polarised. They don't 'know' each other.

Over the years, I have thought a lot about this idea of 'knowing' and have been struck by its importance to all of us of knowing and being known in our lives. Above all, it gives us a sense of belonging. But I also been struck by a tendency in human society to regard some people as 'other', and that concerns me because implicit in that 'othering' is the sense that the 'other' is somehow less important. It allows us, if we are not careful, to dehumanise the 'other', denying their individuality and lumping people together. For some, it's then a short step to blaming the 'other' for the ills of our society, perhaps even taking matters into our own hands.

Today, we live in an ever more-globalised world where we know so much more about what is happening, and more immediately, than previous generations did. It is a world where our actions and choices have far-reaching consequences for those far away from and unknown to us, in ways unimaginable to our forebears. Yet, even with all this knowledge, the difficulty we face with 'knowing' people in other parts of the world is that we can't really do that as individuals. And I think that puts a responsibility on us as Christians to learn what we can about the world and its cultures, to teach ourselves to appreciate diversity, recognising our common humanity as God's children.

And that, perhaps, is the key to this 'knowing'. We are God's children and most important in our lives is to be known by God and, in turn, to know God. In today's reading from Exodus, Moses is told by God '...you have found favour in my sight, and I know you by name'. That being known by name is an expression that God, as we might expect, knew Moses through and through, that nothing was hidden from God. Moses wasn't perfect, far from it, but he was known and, despite his imperfections he found favour with God. And his response was to seek to know God better: he asks God to show him God's ways, he asks God to accompany the people on their journey, he asks God to show him God's glory.

These things are also true for us. God also knows us completely and intimately, God loves us despite our imperfections, and in turn we should seek to know God more deeply. Do we actively do that, I wonder? For many of us, the answer is probably 'sometimes'.

I believe it's vital because knowing God and being known by God is an important step towards learning to live in harmony with one another, of learning to see others through God's eyes and doing our best to love them as God does. In the passage from Thessalonians, Paul makes it clear that he does just this. He knows these people, he sees them through God's eyes, recognising that they are chosen by God and filled with the Holy Spirit. And he reminds them, and us by association, that they are called to be imitators of the Lord, of Jesus, to follow his example, enabled to do so by the power of the Holy Spirit. In turn, they are becoming known to the people around them for their faith in God.

The 'knowing' in today's Gospel reading is slightly different. It continues Matthew's account of the Jewish leaders' efforts to bring about Jesus' downfall. They start by saying 'Teacher, we know that you are sincere, and teach the way of God in accordance with truth...' They are right in these things, of course, but it is also abundantly clear that they don't 'know' Jesus in any real sense. As ever, Jesus turns the tables on them. We can't pretend to God that we know someone.

At this point, and particularly in the light of current events, I would like to add something about Matthew's Gospel more generally. This Gospel is believed to have been written for a Jewish Christian community that had broken away from, or been expelled by their local synagogue where they had their origins. There were doubtless tensions between the two that would account for some of the rhetoric against the Jewish authorities in this Gospel. It is very important that we do not over-interpret this and see it in an anti-Semitic way. Jesus was Jewish; his disciples and first followers were Jewish; many of the ordinary people followed Jesus, at least at times. Matthew's argument is not with the Jewish people as a whole but with those, Jewish or otherwise, who sought to deny Christ and to turn others against him.

In the current conflict between Israel and Palestine, there are human beings on both sides, full of pain, full of fear, longing for a better future, longing for peace in their lives. Earlier in year, some of us had the privilege of hearing about the situation in West Bank from Bryn's first-hand experiences there. It struck me then that both Israelis and Palestinians see each other as 'other', 'not like us', as 'against us'. Periodically, some from both groups take matters into their own hands. Now the situation has exploded. It is hard not to envisage God as weeping over this latest human tragedy. Can we take time to understand the history and culture of both Israelis and Palestinians, to recognise our common humanity with them, to 'know' them well enough to weep with God.? Or do we register our shock, our helplessness and our despair and then move on with our lives, hoping that such trouble won't come our way?

As Christians, we can, and should, hope and pray that God will work in the hearts and minds of people to bring about the miracle of peace. We should pray for those who are working in the Middle East to try to bring about some sort of resolution or at least to stop the situation escalating - and I write that conscious that the situation may have changed unrecognisably between my writing this and your reading it.

But perhaps, most immediately, our response and our responsibility should be in our own community, to get to know those around us; to challenge attitudes, in ourselves as well as others, that categorise some people as 'other'; to ensure that there are not groups of people within our communities who we don't 'know', who as a society we are tempted to regard as 'other'. As imitators of Jesus, we all need to play our part in breaking down barriers that lead to separation and recognise our common humanity as children of God, even those whom we disagree with. To do so is to start to transform our society and be part of a movement working for peace in the world.