

Sermon: 27 August 2017 (Trinity11)

Readings: Romans 12.1-8; Matthew 16.13-20

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In this morning's Gospel reading we heard Jesus talking to his disciples and asking "What do people think about me?" – and they tell him,

"The people have lots of idea about you. Some say you are John the Baptist. Others say Elijah. Yet others say Jeremiah or one of the prophets."

And Jesus says to them, "And you? What do you make of me?"

We are told that Jesus' favourite method of teaching was to tell parables – word puzzles – which often ended with a question, like:

"Which of them was right?" or

"Who was neighbour to the man who fell among thieves?"

"What do you think?"

We, Jesus listeners, are not given answers but hints – signposts; we are asked to work out the answers for ourselves.

In today's Gospel, when Peter gives his answer: "You are the Messiah. The Son of God." Jesus commends him and says that this answer is a gift of God to him – but then goes on to tell him not to repeat to anyone else what God has revealed to him.

This seems strange to us for as Christians we have been brought up to believe that "telling people who Jesus is – proclaiming the Good News – the Gospel" is an important part of Christian discipleship. Surely this is what these first disciples did after Jesus' resurrection – and the result was the spread of the Church throughout the world.

St Francis of Assisi, one of the great witnesses for Christ, told his disciples that it was their duty of course to proclaim the Gospel – but only to use words if absolutely necessary. Their good deeds would do the work much better.

To go back to the Gospel story: when the time came for Peter and the others to proclaim Jesus as Messiah – they soon discovered that their hearers – those who believed that Jesus was John the Baptist, or Elijah or one of the prophets, were not convinced by their words – they argued back – they felt that they were as entitled to their own opinions as the Christian disciples were.

At the end of the day, words, arguments are only really useful for building up the faith of people who already believe – but the transition from unbelief to faith is more likely to be achieved by the example of love and kindness shown by the disciples.

Henri Nouwen talks of the importance of 'hospitality' in proclaiming the Gospel. But he uses 'hospitality' in a special way. The Dutch word for 'hospitality' (which I won't attempt to pronounce) means literally "giving freedom to the guest" – the creation of a space where a stranger may enter and become a friend – and the heart of hospitality is this 'friendly space' where a stranger may enter and discover more about their own freedom. Hospitality is not

an invitation to adopt the lifestyle of the host – but a gift – an opportunity for the guest to find his own lifestyle – the freedom to sing his own songs. Speak his own language; the freedom to leave if he wants to in order to follow his own calling.

If this is right, then perhaps the greatest gift we can give anyone is ‘nothing’ – perhaps the best witness for Christianity is simply to be there for others and to give them our loving attention.

We are so used to the idea of the Holy Spirit as a gift that comes to us and gives us something: insights, knowledge about God. But what if the truth is the opposite – we are not called to receive anything extra – but to empty ourselves in order that we might begin to realise and appreciate what we already have – something so much greater than we can imagine and so much more than we can ever possess – the love of God and that, in that love, we are united with everything and everyone that God has created; our views, our opinions, our doctrines, while important to us, are secondary to the truth that we all need one another and must find ways to live together in peace.

Jesus talked of ‘Poverty of Spirit’ – freedom from narrow-mindedness and prejudice – forms of blindness which alienate us from those around us.

Surely this is what St Paul was hinting at in his image of the body, where every limb and organ works together quite naturally – where independence is an illusion – each part has been created to work in love and harmony with the rest.

This is summed up in one of the Fr Anthony De Mello’s stories drawn from the Buddhist tradition.

A Zen Master who had a reputation for transparent love and simplicity drew visitors from all over the world – one day someone from England, like you or I, came to see him in a spirit of enquiry.

The Master took a teapot and filled the visitor’s cup, but when it was full he kept pouring till the tea spilt over the sides. Eventually the visitor could restrain himself no longer: “It is over-full. No more will go in”, he cried. The master stopped pouring. “Like this cup,” he said, “you are full of your own opinions and speculations. How can I show you Zen unless you first empty your cup.”