

Sunday 2nd September 2018
Trinity 14 (B)

Liverpool Parish Church

OT: Deuteronomy 4.1-2,6-9
NT: James 1.17-end
G: Mark 7.1-8,14-15,21-23

Every generous act of giving, with every perfect gift, is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change.

Words of St James taken from his letter to his people, early Christians, probably living in Jerusalem. This is the same James who was a close companion of Jesus who together with his brother John, and Peter, was present at the Transfiguration, at the raising of Jairus's daughter and in the garden of Gethsemane. James, a forceful character known with John as Boanerges, the Sons of Thunder. James who wanted to call down fire on a village that would not accept Jesus' teaching. James who had a compliant father, Zebedee who was content to let his fisherman sons go to follow Jesus. James who had a pushy mother who wanted her two sons to sit at Jesus' right and left in the kingdom of heaven. It is this James to whom these beautiful words are attributed.

Every generous act of giving, with every perfect gift, is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change.

This teaching forms a stark contrast to meanness of spirit shown by the Pharisees in Mark's gospel. Their obsession is with the letter of the Law and not the spirit. They try to use the Law to illustrate their own superiority over the less well educated. Their devotion to God is empty and without foundation. It has become dried up and barren, serving their needs and not God's.

Quoting Isaiah, Jesus says

“This people honours me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me; in vain do they worship me, teaching human precepts as doctrines.”

The recent death of Senator John McCain has provided a modern-day illustration of meanness of spirit. The shocking footage of Trump dismissing him as a war hero because he was captured, completely ignoring the suffering he endured through torture or the valour he showed in refusing freedom as it would be used to discredit his father and his country. And even death could not stop Trump in his attempts to demean a man he clearly felt threatened by. Trump’s order to raise the US flag from half mast just one day after the Senator’s death was truly an act of meanness of spirit, a petty and pathetic gesture. The mean in spirit are not happy people. If we focus only on ourselves, if we act selfishly without consideration for others, we bring darkness not just others but to ourselves. We will become dried up and miserable people. Anxious that others will somehow better us, that we will lose our place as the centre of our universe.

Being generous in spirit calls for courage. It calls for focussing only on the Father’s will, listening always for the guidance of the Holy Spirit, following Jesus. James discovered that this can be a difficult, unpredictable road. It led him up the mountain to the Transfiguration and a vision of the glory of Jesus as God. But it also led him into the garden of Gethsemane and a vision of Jesus as the Suffering Servant, a man overcome by sorrow and dread.

Being generous in spirit calls for us to open up ourselves to others, to truly listen to the people we meet, to allow ourselves to be transformed by them. Our giving should not be

condescending but an acknowledgement that all we have comes from God and that when we give, we are simply being used as his instruments to share his grace.

I was lucky enough to live in the L'Arche community in Liverpool in the 80's. I lived with people with learning disabilities who had suffered from others' ignorance, from their fear, from their need to exert their authority over something they could not understand.

Those old institutions where people were locked away were not happy places, they were places of darkness and dread. Jean Vanier founded L'Arche, the Ark, to be a place where all people live together as equals, acknowledging that all of us have gifts, all of us have weaknesses, that experiences, good and bad, have shaped us. No-one should seek to dominate another, we should listen to one another, we should allow our hurts to be healed and we should bring healing in our turn.

In that community I lived with people who had known pain but who had experienced the presence of Jesus at the centre of their suffering and by his wounds they had been healed so that the joy and power they brought with them to share with other community members was life changing. Jean Vanier's life is a testament to the transforming power of those whom society considers to be weak and worthless. People with a learning disability can exhibit a generosity of spirit because they are not limited by the inhibitions that can hold back many of us. L'Arche communities are places of light and hope.

Waiting for the bride yesterday, I was chatting with one of the bridesmaids who now lives in New Zealand. She commented that since she last visited Liverpool just over a year ago, she had noticed a shocking increase in the number of homeless people living on the streets.

Public money and resources are in increasingly short supply while demand for services continues to increase. The negative impact of Brexit, the fear of terrorism, the supposed increase in immigrants to the West. These factors have caused people to become withdrawn, to look to their own needs, to be suspicious of others.

Now more than ever, we need to be generous, generous with our time, our money, ourselves. We need to be mindful of others, to allow ourselves to truly meet with others, to understand that we all have something to give and receive. We need to shed God's light in our world, to imitate his overwhelming generosity, to be big-hearted and joyful.

In the words of the hymn, attributed to St Francis

Where there's despair in life let me bring hope

Where there is darkness, only light

And where there's sadness ever joy.

The Revd Michelle Montrose