

Sunday 13th February 2022
3 before Lent (C)

Liverpool Parish Church

OT: Jeremiah 17.5-10
NT: I Corinthians 15.12-20
G: Luke 6.17-26

There are many tasks and rituals at St Nick's on Sunday mornings. Many of them you see in front of you, but some are more hidden. A significant task undertaken by the clergy every week is to ascend the tower and pray with the bellringers. If you notice a pause in the ringing at about 9.25am every week, then that is what is going on. However, without being too disloyal to some of my colleagues, some people are more comfortable with heights than others, so I generally go up the narrow spiral staircase about once a fortnight.

Vertical movement is one of the structural givens of human existence, and the meta-narratives of everything from literature to the establishment of institutions depicts vertical movement, very often in the form of hierarchy. As many of you know, I sit on a number of Boards of Directors or Trustees, and in a large organization it should always be an aspiration to flatten the vertical structure. This is often done financially through the executive pay gap, committing to fixing parameters in the relationship between the lowest and the highest paid workers. But this is not enough: at the moment I am setting up focus groups in one charity so that Board members can have direct access to the experience of people at all levels in the organization.

And then we read today's Gospel which, you may have noticed, is Luke's version of the Beatitudes which are also delivered in Matthew's Gospel as part of the Sermon on the Mount. The text is a little bit different and rather more radical. Instead of "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven" Luke has "Blessed are you who are poor,

for yours is the kingdom of God.” And where Matthew writes, “Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled,” Luke writes, “Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you will be filled.” But there is another difference as well: in Matthew’s Gospel the scene is set by the line, “When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain; and after he sat down, his disciples came to him.” But in Luke’s version it is almost entirely the opposite: “He came down with them and stood on a level place, with a great crowd of his disciples and a great multitude of people.”

This is not difference for the sake of difference, but a structural subversion of expectation. This is not the superior person standing on high and giving teaching ‘down’ to his audience. This is instead the superior person stepping down to be level with those who came for the very purpose of looking up to him. This is not, though, a quirk of Luke’s Gospel, but it is of course the essence of the incarnation, that God came and stood on a level with us, that God was born human, not looking down on his creation, but looking across on a level.

In our second reading today we get another subversion of expectation, creating a structuralist narrative which is peculiar to Christ. In the reading St Paul wrote, “Now if Christ is proclaimed as raised from the dead, how can some of you say there is no resurrection of the dead?” Clearly some of those Paul was addressing were struck with the implausibility of the situation, but at the heart of this is the implausibility of it. Jesus died on the cross, and so it is beyond our imagination that he should not be dead, that he should be resurrected. But the language used is within a vertical structure: in our Creed in a moment we shall speak of Jesus descending to the dead, and the resurrection in Paul’s letter is about Jesus being ‘raised’. The reversal of the expectation, that the dead can be alive, is told in the language of descent and ascent, and the vertical structure predominates.

Let us look again at the Lukan Beatitudes. Within the structure there are points of connection. Having constructed dichotomies – rich and poor, the hungry and the not hungry – the author begins to connect them. Just as he says, “Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you will be filled,” he goes on to connect the opposites: “Woe to you who are full now, for you will be hungry.” In fact the whole passage (perhaps even the whole Bible) is about subverting expectation and uniting opposites, and creating connections where they seem least likely.

It is an unexpected articulation of our Christian calling, that being Christlike is about making unlikely connections. However, it is what we naturally try and do. For example, it is estimated that just under 60% of foodbanks are run by faith groups, and every foodbank becomes a pivotal movement between those who have and those who do not have: they are a meeting point and a place of encounter. In fact church itself is the same, because it brings together people from all backgrounds in a place of encounter. Jesus did not do his ministry from a distance, but mixed with the poor and the rich, the tax collectors, and those who despised them. Society in the time of Jesus was no more or less hierarchical than today, but it is evident from his life that Jesus made connections at all points in that hierarchy: he himself ‘flattened the structure’.

In the corporate or charity sector we work to flatten the structure not necessarily because of any great moral principle, but because it makes commercial sense. Your employees will be more effective and loyal if they feel a degree of ownership of the business and that they have a valid voice, rather than that they are working for others to make profit. Conversely, the business does better if the employers have insight into the reality of working for the

organization: this enables them to shape the support which employees are given to do their job in the most successful way they can. We apply the same principles to society as a whole: if we can flatten the structure and create points of connection across division then it is of mutual benefit. Jesus does not say that there will not always be rich and poor, hungry and full, but he does imply that they are two sides of the same coin, and you cannot separate them out without a negative impact on both.

“[Jesus] came down with them and stood on a level place.” Where is the level place where we meet others? Is it here in church? Or are there multiple places where we receive the insight into the experience of others which helps us to shape the world which we share? The more points of connection we can create, the wealthier we shall be as a society, a wealth measured in the flourishing of all. Level places are safe places, because no one has far to fall.

Fr Crispin Pailing