

**Sunday 21 July 2024**

**Liverpool Parish Church**

**Eighth Sunday After Trinity**

**OT: Jeremiah 23:1-6**

**NT: Ephesians 2:11-22**

**Gp: Mark 6:30-34, 53-56**

You're probably familiar with the idea of transference. Transference is when we take unresolved fears and desires about someone or something and project them on to another person. It can often take place during therapy, when the therapist becomes the release valve for the client's anger or love, for instance. Therapy can bring up all sorts of deeply buried emotions. It is also a caring relationship, and care is a two-edged sword. By reminding us of our vulnerability, care can make us resentful. One way out of this is to lash out at those who care for us; another is to idolise them.

I have mentioned therapists, but transference can happen in many other areas of life where power relationships are involved. Bosses, political leaders, doctors, influencers, clergy - the list goes on. All can become the screen on to which people project the things about themselves and their desires that they find difficult to cope with.

Transference is not necessarily a bad thing. Where it is recognised, it can become part of the healing process – a way of starting to express feelings which cannot come out directly. But if we get stuck in transference, we most likely get boxed into an infantile state. We do not take ownership of our own turmoil, with destructive consequences for us and for our relationships.

I worry when politics becomes a game of transference; when leaders just reflect back and magnify the fear and violence inside us. The adulation of popular leaders at political conventions plays into this, especially when those leaders buy into their own status as messiahs. It becomes possible to manipulate the strong emotions of the crowd; to create scapegoats; to pose as a saviour. Such leaders probably lack insight into their own desires, even as they incite the desires of others.

It is interesting to read Jesus' interactions with crowds in this light. In some ways, he fits the bill of a popular healer and teacher of the first century. And we know it was a time when several would-be messiahs came forward – and Jesus does sometimes seem to talk up his own status.

But for the most part, Jesus frustrates the crowds that follow him. He speaks in parables which seem both simple and hard to grasp – and which, in any case, do not promise an imminent future of victory and glory. He seems to refer to himself as 'the Son of Man', an enigmatic title which has some messianic connotations but could just as easily refer to any

mortal human being. He talks of suffering, self-loss, the blessedness of the meek and pure-hearted.

There are times he faces outright rejection and hostility. More interesting, perhaps, are the occasions when he simply seems to baffle people. But that does not stop them projecting their desires on to him. The disciples jockey for positions of authority by his side or want to conduct a holy war on his behalf. The crowds are desperate for his healing, liberating power - but just as ready to turn on him if he does not give them what they want. In transference, adulation and resentment walk hand in hand.

In our gospel today, it is for the sake of the disciples that he wants to go to a deserted place. Jesus knows how vital it is to have space from demands, leisure and quiet so that people can be refreshed. But this is about more than having a rest. It is also a way of putting distance between himself and the crowd's infantile attachment. They want him to be the Saviour they think they need, not the Son of Man he is.

So, Jesus is on the move. Sometimes, Jesus seeks to get away from people altogether, to find that wilderness space where he can live unencumbered by projections. He does not want to be pinned down. The presence and reign of God that he proclaims is not a territory, not a set of dogmas, but something that grows in secret and overturns expectations. It is an invitation for all to eat at one table, for lords to be servants and debts to be forgiven. An invitation to mature freedom, not sickly need.

Of course, in the gospel, the crowd catches up with Jesus. He does not reject them but looks at them with compassion. They are sheep without a shepherd, and he will fulfil that role for them. And they rush around and beg him to do things for them.

The compassion of Jesus should not be misunderstood. His service to them and us also consists in challenging us and confounding our expectations – so that we do not remain stuck in our unresolved fear and desire. These are the hallmarks of the good news as Jesus offers it: not to live from fear; not to compete for what the world desires; not to confuse our own projections with the ways of God, which are hidden. For this God is always on the move, always escaping the fixed definition or the idolatrous image. This God frees us by friendship, not domination.

This is the 'one new humanity' which the letter to the Ephesians talks about: a humanity that is not riven by competitive rivalry and exclusion. In Christ, the hostility is broken down, along with all our illusions.

Yes, there are times Jesus turns with compassion to the crowd and answers their desperation. God *is* with us in all of our night terrors and unmanageable wanting. We just have to read the psalms to know that. God *is* with us in the guilt and vulnerability inside us. That is what God's freely given forgiveness and acceptance mean.

And yet Jesus also never stops walking the road, taking us somewhere else: away from easy answers and more of the same fantasies. Away from 'crowds' where no one takes responsibility for their own life. He walks towards the cross and the empty tomb and says

to us: take up *your* cross; die and rise *with* me; become my sisters and brothers, the adopted children of God. Faith in him is not a set of easy answers or certainties. And it cannot stay with transference and projection. It is a way to real healing, a way of living our messy lives and carrying our unanswered questions with honesty and grace. And so, in our imperfect compassion, we become a dwelling place for God, whose love is always more than enough.

**Fr Steven Shakespeare**