

Sunday 1 September 2024
The Fourteenth Sunday after Trinity

Liverpool Parish Church

OT: Deuteronomy 4:1-2, 6-9

NT: James 1:17-27

Gp: Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23

This week I saw a particularly fine headline. It said: 'Sex and secrets in the Prime Minister's limo.' Sadly, this was not about Keir Starmer. More surprisingly, perhaps, it did not concern the escapades of one of our recent prime ministers who is best left unnamed. In fact, it is a story from before the first world war and concerns the last Liberal PM, Herbert Asquith. It's long been known that the married Asquith had some kind of relationship with Venetia Stanley, a friend of his daughter, 35 years younger than him. He is said to have shared sensitive government information with her, exchanged frequent letters and gone for drives in his prime ministerial limo. Biographers have played down the relationship in the past, but new research suggests it was more passionate than once thought. Apparently, the car in question had a completely sealed rear compartment with pull-down blinds and only an intercom to speak with the driver.

I'll leave it to you whether such circumstantial evidence is compelling, but it is telling that this can be news over a hundred years after the fact. For all we get angry or cynical about politicians when they are shown up to be morally compromised, I'd wager that a part of us actually enjoys it. It applies to celebrities too. There's a kind of pleasure in watching the soap opera of these glittering lives unfold, in all their tawdry splendour.

Why is this? Why do we enjoy scandal? Why do we, sometimes, seem to revel in taking offence? I suspect a fair bit of it is rejoicing in our own moral superiority. We don't like to think about our own moral fragility, or how we would cope with the glare of publicity and the temptations of power.

And yet, we also know that there are times when the behaviour of those with responsibility does have to be called out as scandalous. There are times when we do have to challenge the offensive comments and actions of those who bare their cruelty and prejudice in public.

When and how to be scandalised or to scandalise others demands discernment. It also demands honesty about our own motivation.

Our word 'scandal' comes from the Greek *skandalon*, which literally refers to a trap or stumbling block. It's used several times in the New Testament, in noun and verb form. Sometimes it is simply a negative thing. For example, Jesus and Paul warn us against putting stumbling blocks in the way of others, especially the most vulnerable; it is better to have a millstone tied round your neck and be thrown into the sea than to put a stumbling block – literally to scandalise – in front of these little ones, Jesus says.

But at other times, Jesus seems to set out deliberately to make people stumble, to scandalise them. In Matthew's version of the story we heard from Mark's gospel today, Jesus' disciples say to him "Do you know that the Pharisees took offence [literally, 'were scandalised'] when they heard what you said?"

The Pharisees are of course an easy target for Christian preachers. They get a bad press in the gospels, and it is quite true Jesus reserves some harsh criticism for them. Here, they question why Jesus and his followers do not follow the practice of ritually washing things before they eat off them. Jesus responds that this is just a human custom; and, in any case,

it is not the food we eat that gets defiled and defiles us; we should focus on what comes out of our hearts, the things that cause us to damage others and ourselves.

So, the Pharisees are scandalised; Jesus teaching becomes a stumbling block to them. But what is the scandal here? Christians often see Jesus rejecting whole swathes of the Jewish law; the gospel writer here adds the comment, 'thus he declared all food clean'. But this does not fit with huge parts of the New Testament. The earliest believers were Jewish and practised the Jewish law; if Jesus had so clearly rejected it, why were there such debates about whether to follow laws about clean foods, or circumcision?

No, Jesus is not making a sweeping judgement about the Law. We should not read this story in the light of later divisions and anti-Jewish sentiment.

Instead, Jesus is pointing out that the interpretation of the Law given by the Pharisees is a human construct, not a divine command. And that it misses the point of the Law. The scandal he causes is not that he rejects his Jewish covenant, but that he challenges the Pharisees' claim to be its spokespeople.

In some ways, the Pharisees were close to Jesus. Their aim was to extend the purity and holiness rules for Temple priests and apply them to all faithful Jews. They were aiming for a kind of lay holiness, a deeper following of God's ways in everyday life.

However, Jesus points out how such movements always demand discernment and compassion. And this is by no means a point aimed at first century Pharisees alone. It applies to all of us: whenever we let our desire for purity and being in the right override our compassion, mercy and openness. And that has happened too many times in Christian history for us to feel complacent or self-righteous about it.

Jesus is drawing on a rich tradition of Jewish scripture. How often do the prophets criticise those who put the correctness of their worship above justice, for instance? How often do they suggest that the cult of sacrifice is not the heart of Jewish faith? In Hosea, God says 'I desire steadfast love and not sacrifice, the knowledge of God rather than burnt-offerings.' Or, as Micah puts it

'With what shall I come before the Lord, and bow myself before God on high? Shall I come before him with burnt-offerings, with calves a year old? He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?'

Such themes are echoed in the letter to James. This letter says we cannot hide behind grand words about faith if we maintain inequality and injustice. For James, the Law matters – because it is a mirror held up to us. It demands honesty and discernment. It reminds us to look out for the most vulnerable and be thankful for every good gift that comes from God. It is a law of liberty, freeing us from ego and indifference. As James puts it, 'Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to care for orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world.' No Old Testament prophet could have put it better.

Jesus himself firmly rejects making people stumble for the sake of our own power and purity. But he is prepared to cause scandal himself, when it means challenging our self-righteousness, and neglect; or when it means pointing out that our cherished beliefs are in fact a ruse to defend our privilege, power or prejudice.

Sadly, there are still those within churches who try to set up a rigid purity code, who want to hunt heretics and exclude those who love differently from them. I think Jesus shows us

that questioning such ideas is actually part of being faithful to God's word. Being faithful allows us to ask questions even about our most powerful inherited traditions. And the main question to ask of any such tradition is: does it widen our sense of God's mercy and love? Does it foster generosity and compassion? Or does it lead to self-congratulatory and self-righteous judgement?

Ultimately, the most powerful use of the word 'scandal' in the New Testament is about Jesus himself. He is the stone against which people stumble. He is, as Paul writes, a stumbling block for Jews and a folly to Gentiles. No one is exempt from the temptation to self-righteousness or to think that we have a hotline to God and God's power. On the cross, however, Jesus shows us what it means that God is love, love without holding anything back, the love which is the only good reason to scandalise the world.

Fr Steven Shakespeare