

SERMON FOR ST JAMES' DAY 2018 | 15.07.18

They say we live in 'interesting times' and this week has been exceptional in the number of headline stories. We began by holding our breath as England played in the World Cup against Croatia – and again when there was a chance of rescuing those young Thai boys, two and a half miles underground. Within hours of the Chequers summit David Davis and Boris Johnson had resigned from their jobs in government while confusion reigned about how Donald Trump viewed Teresa May – was it, or was it not, 'fake news' – and we saw a quarter of a million people (and one very large balloon) protesting alongside Sadiq Khan about Trumps' visit. Squeezed into the small print was the investigation into the source of the Novichok virus, the record number of economic migrant drownings in the Mediterranean and the outlawing of Winnie the Pooh picture in China by their President for life, Xi Jinping, because of the two of them look rather similar. That's not to mention what has been happening on Love Island, the defeat of Serena Williams or the Christening of Prince Louis.

In today's Gospel, a mother comes up to Jesus and falls on her knees. *Please, she says, look after my boys. When everything is done and dusted and this Kingdom that you talk about is finally set up, can you make sure that they get important places in your team, right next to you? Please...*

Of course the story moves on and away from her; within the minutes the disciples are mocking the two brothers for their presumption. But if we go there too quickly, we miss this key bit of the story. The mother wants the best for her sons. And which mother wouldn't? *Please take care of them* she begs.

And it takes us back into the political and maelstrom we started with. If our child was dangerously ill, how tempted would we be to jump the queue by buying private medicine; if they had exceptional talent, wouldn't we, if we could afford it, try to get them a place at a fee paying school where those special gifts would be given a better chance to flourish? How much advantage does Boris have with his Eton background over David Davis, brought up on a Council estate? How much of what we have now is a product of our genes and how much because of the social environment we happened to be brought up in?

And if we want to add yet one more hot potato, how do we explain pay 'fairness' after the revelation that, still, the top ten wage earners at the BBC are all male?

I think one of the extraordinary features of Donald Trump is his apparent lack of awareness of the huge privileges that were his at birth. I don't know (and don't very much care) about the exact figures but I do know that he was born into extraordinary wealth – and yet he always gives the impression that he is, somehow, a self-made man: that his achievements stem from the fact that he is a brilliant negotiator – and, by virtue of who he is, a much tougher cookie than any mere female Prime Minister of the UK (does that include Scotland by the way?!) As if Air Force One and his 30 minute interview with Piers Morgan were his by right, the results of his own magnetic personality and will power.

Lord, when you get into your own kingdom, declare that these two sons of mine will sit, one at your right hand and the other at your left...

Jesus' response to the mother of James and John is interesting. It isn't, as we might expect, a tirade about queue jumping or privilege. He simply asks the two lads, directly, *are you prepared to suffer?* They stammer a reply. *We are*, they tell him.

And indeed they are and they will. We know that our own St James (because that is who we are talking about) got caught up in one of Herod's vicious pogroms against the Christians and as leader of the small Church in Jerusalem, James was summarily beheaded. Yes, they were willing to suffer. So far so good.

But then Jesus goes on to tease out the way that God works. *To sit at my right hand and at my left*, he says, *is not for me to grant but it is for those for whom it has been prepared by my Father.*

O dear? Does this mean that there is still some privilege system at work - even with God and his Church? Does it mean that some will get fast-tracked to heaven because of how charismatic, famous and well regarded they became? Is it true that those front row chairs are already reserved for those who have somehow risen to the top because of some special privilege?

And the answer has to be no.

I don't know if you are familiar with money boxes. Out in the Angel yesterday I was looking for one of those fat piggy banks that seemed always to be available on Chapel Street Market – that is, until I wanted to buy one! *[This ugly item will have to do, not a pig but a kind of bird..]* You know how they work. You drop money into them on a regular basis until the day comes when they are full. *[A series of pound coins are dropped through the slot]*

Now, for the sake of our theme: let's identify what is going into that pig (bird). The coins might represent all kinds of things: it might be good looks, it might be intelligence, it might be certain skills, it might be economic security, the gift of being funny, or sporty or good with your hands, good with data, good with ... whatever.

Into that slot are all these things – and they are gifts, things given to you at birth. This is you and your store of gifts: your 'piggy bank'.

But then what?

Because these piggy banks don't have a small device for getting the money out, bit by bit. The whole point about these kind of piggy banks is that you have to smash them to release the coins that are inside...

St Paul, writing his second letter to the Church in Corinth – a group of street-wise 1st century Christians who had become increasingly complacent and hard to deal with – picks up the piggy bank theme. *For the treasure we have lies in clay jars - so that it may be made clear to us that our extraordinary powers belong – not to us – but to God. God has been feeding all kind of gifts, talents and privileges into that slot – and the temptation for us is to keep them there. They are ours, we deserve them.*

Nonsense, says God, nothing you have is 'yours'. You were given all these things – not just for your own good but for the sake of the world in which you live.

SMASH BIRD WITH HAMMER

And it the people who are willing to break the jar and share the contents for whom those special places are reserved in heaven.

The ones who are willing to break out of the fixation that what we have belongs to us alone, the ones who spend their time, their energies and their love, making sure that whatever privileges and gifts have come our way are shared as widely as possible.

It might be a lot. Equally it might be a very little because life hasn't put very much in our piggy bank in the first place.

What Jesus is asking is: do we have the humility to admit that what we have is God's? And do we have the courage to smash the piggy banks, the clay pots, to release those gifts for the benefit of us all. It is about taking risks – yes – and also about giving God the glory for what we have inherited.

Because risk is what God is about. He fed those gifts into us – but always in the hope that we would make use of what he had so wonderfully given us.

And this thought is picked up in the hymn that Brian and Caroline Yeats have chosen to sing after Communion as part of Oscar's baptism service this morning. The second half of verse one goes like this:

*By trusting Christ to human care
God blessed for evermore
the care of children everywhere,
the bruised, the lost, the poor...*

Some risk!

These are interesting times – and the pressure to look after ourselves gets stronger and stronger as all the things I listed at the beginning compete for our attention. But the call, as spelled out by Jesus, is as clear now as was to the mother of our St James: there is no place in heaven for those who sit on their hands. What you have, whether a lot or a little, is given for you to use and to share – wherever and whenever you see others in need.

Freely you have received: freely give.