

## **SERMON FOR TRINITY 13 | 15.09.2019**

Exodus 32: 7-14; I Timothy 1: 12-17; St Luke 15: 1-10

**So - David Cameron has finally put pen to paper and published his version of the 2016 Referendum. In his new autobiography he doesn't pull any punches: with the same scorn for colleagues that we understand both Margaret Thatcher and John Major had after they left office, the air is thick with charges of hypocrisy, manipulation and simple dishonesty. Politics, right now, appears to have no rules, no patience - and no charity.**

**But of course, that is nothing new. In today's Gospel Jesus is surrounded by a crowd of hopeful people, delighted that there was someone willing to take an interest in them, someone who understood them. And what does St Luke tell us is going on in the background? The religious elite are criticizing him for talking - and, worse still, eating - with the riff raff.**

**One of the many joys of the First Communion programme is the very first session when we take a tour of the Church. Now this is no Cathedral and what we have is necessarily fairly modest but it takes us about an hour and newcomers are always gob-smacked by how much is packed into these four walls, by the explanations of why things are as they are and by the deeper meanings of the features inside St James' we so easily take for granted. Poor Danni in particular went away looking like her head was exploding!**

**And perhaps it was: exploding not just from an overload in information – but in the face of a huge new world that was opening up.**

**Among the many thing that our church buildings are able to do is to reveal more of the created universe than we would otherwise see; to come into contact with different ways of speaking, different metaphors, different symbols – and yet with the common purpose of showing us, not that difference is to be pushed to one side and rejected because it is threatening but that our differences are really exciting and can lead us into new directions and new territory. As Nicholas Lash said, *God's call and his gift to each of us is to see how friendship and our care and solidarity for one another – rooted in our faith in Christ Jesus - is capable of crossing every boundary – whether it is class, geography, faith or wealth.***

**But that journey is not easy! And the reason it isn't easy is that we seem to be hard-wired to want to stick with 'people like us'. Our current politics are only a reflection, writ large, of that divisive gene that wants to put up barricades against anyone who sees things the world differently. While we read fiction or watch it on TV – everything from Shakespeare's King Lear to Margaret Atwood's the Handmaids's Tale, and we revel in the other world's they conjure up – we tend to do it comfortably tucked up in our favourite chair or when we are lying in bed.**

**Because to truly engage in those cultures and communities is a much bigger ask. The philosopher and novelist Kwame Appiah, who has spent a lifetime writing on this topic, talks about the joy he finds in looking for parallels between his own Ghanaian/English life and those of other cultures and creeds. He delights in seeing how people talk about themselves, what makes them laugh, what they find beautiful, the priorities they have. But he recognises that this takes huge amounts of patience, imagination and physical effort: *don't we have enough else to be thinking about?***

**Yet this is precisely what Jesus is talking about in his little parable. We imagine that the lamb in this story is just lost. But what if we take the word to mean 'separated from us'? Perhaps Jesus is actually teaching us to do what Appiah is describing – searching out and engaging with those who are separated (and different) from us.**

**New ideas will take into new places altogether – into a new space.**

**Just as Barry, Hayley and Danni, Luca and Francesca, stood in here and felt, perhaps for the first time, the scale of the space that God is beginning to share with them, so new horizons were slowly being opening up.**

**Last Sunday we were delighted to be able to welcome Eve Holtom for her baptism. And we all heard the words used as we blessed the water, of the achievements of Abraham, Moses and John the Baptist – the backdrop to the way that God has been working to reveal his love for us through thousands of years, to the point we are today.**

**And what that prayer always does is to encourage us to turn their stories into ‘our stories’ – so that the experiences of these remote and very different people from years ago, fused with our stories of today, becomes THE story. We, as much as them, are part of God’s plan – despite our obvious differences and insights.**

**Richard Sennett makes this point: *the thing about belonging to a community like the Church is that our sheer variety and diversity means that it is impossible to hold on to one tiny bit of the truth and to say that is all there is. For in no time at all we will meet someone who holds a different view. But because we are a family of friends, sharing our life together, we quickly discover that we are all the same. The ‘we’ feeling outguns every other desire to remain separate.***

**Because of our faith we are taken into a new world and strangeness and unfamiliarity are a spur for us to grow, not to erect barriers.**

**And that is what we are holding out to our First Communicants: the call for them as members of the Church to be examples of how different people can be signs of God’s new creation, where we genuinely care for people we don’t know when faced with the disasters on the scale of the Hurricanes in the Bahamas as we will do this Harvest; where we pray our socks off for the people like Nazanin Zaghari Radcliffe and all the other currently being held hostage in prisons in Iran; when we challenge the rich to ensure there is housing and education for all and when we stand up against corporate greed and the idea that it is only money that talks.**

**About twenty years ago, when quite a lot of new churches were being built especially in America, France and Germany, a new feature was built into them, usually in a room that then led into the worship space – the sanctuary proper. Strange to say, it was a fireplace – the kind of thing you would have in a grand house, complete with mantelshelf, cards and nicknacks! What the new architects wanted to say was that the Church building was not just a worshipping centre and a place for exploring exciting new ideas. It was also *Domus Ecclesiae*: the home of the Church.**

**And the one feature about home life when we love closely with other people - the fundamental principle that has to be there otherwise it doesn't work – is that we have to be able, quickly, frequently and sincerely, to forgive one another. As we sang in our responsorial psalm this morning: *God is forgiveness. Dare to forgive and God will be with you. God is forgiveness. Love and do not fear.***

**Keeping St James' open all day every day is not just a nice thing to do; it is a way of saying 'we all need space' to think bigger, more collectively and with more imagination so that we discover what we have in common more than what divides. *Who, says Jesus, having a hundred sheep, and losing one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine and go after the one that is lost until he finds it?***

**I am not the only one who is sorry that our politics have become dominated by the two extremes and by what divides. One nation politics has largely gone out of fashion and the insecurities that make our leaders take up irreconcilable positions are dominant - at least for the moment.**

**And in this brash and hard-nosed world, some Christian communities are called to do fantastic outreach work, provide amazing social services or work with young people. I believe that our history and our particular circumstances are calling us to be Good Shepherds to those who find themselves temporarily lost, to those longing for a gentle space to explore God's will, in a place which they can call home.**

**With forgiving friends.**