

SERMON FOR ST LUKE'S DAY | 18.10.2020

Isaiah 40: 27-31; Acts 3: 1-10; St Luke 13: 10-17

It is a strange phrase, and I can't now remember who said them to me, but I have never forgotten them: 'Disappointment can eat you alive'.

It is odd, but it fits into so many different contexts - from the trivial to the profound: from the 'the toast has burnt again' level to those who go through life perpetually disappointed with what life throws up at them - who wear that expression on their faces which shows that nothing is ever quite right.

Today we at St James' have reason to be disappointed. Today five young people were due to be baptised and five were due to make their first communion – some of them doing both. We had been preparing for this celebration for a long time – a high day in what feels like a sea of grey. There was lots of excitement round and genuine pleasure in drawing families more closely into the life of the Church. And then, with days to go, two were withdrawn in a dispute which was nothing to do with St James' and one of the others was exposed to Coronavirus. Disappointing or what?!

Of course, in the middle of this pandemic, it barely registers on the 'disappointment meter'. So many are losing their jobs, having to cancel weddings, missing out on urgent surgery and being separated from their elderly loved ones as care homes are shut to the outside world. Yes, we all know that.

But the trouble with this pandemic is the 'low grade' inconveniences. We can get by doing most things, the ordinary is still possible, but it is – like the First Communion – the things that really cheer us up that seem to be vanishing. We are easily caught out by the new restrictions. Having to carry a face mask to go into shops – and frequently not recognizing other people as a result – has quickly lost its novelty value. It just adds to the general sense of disappointment. I bumped into Gemma, one of our first batch of First Communicants, pushing her new son down Packington Street on Friday morning. *How are you coping* I asked? *Getting by* was her honest answer. *We'll be back when things calm down a bit...*

Coronavirus has certainly taken the majority of us out of our comfort zone; but it has taken some into a much more difficult place. The ManU footballer Marcus Rashford, newly awarded an MBE for his work on poverty, has pointed to the fact that there are 1.5million children who spend at least part of each day hungry: that's nearly 10% of our nation's children. The hope at the election that we would see a period of 'levelling up' our standards of care has yet to happen: there has been a 61% increase in demand for food banks as compared with this time last year. Felix, the distributors of food otherwise wasted in London (and a great support for both Pack-Up and the ARC food bank here in Islington), have just served up their 13millionth meal since March.

Apparently, in some university halls of residence 50-60% of the students are in quarantine. And as we discovered on Friday, you can't get a Coronavirus test locally for love nor money.

It's disappointing isn't it?

Today the Church recalls the work of St Luke, the Greek doctor, writer of the third Gospel and also the Book of Acts. We get two of his stories – in the 2nd reading and in the Gospel. And they both tell stories about making people well again (what you would expect in the Bible really!). In the 2nd reading the man begs Peter and John for money as they pass by - familiar the world over.

Do you give money to people in the street? I ask that because it is a dilemma isn't it? We are advised not to by the big agencies because you don't know the background. Some may be scammers, others may be working for drug barons. But something still tugs at us: whatever situation they are in, we have more than they do. And if we did want to give them something, many of us don't carry cash in our pockets anymore... *Giving to charities who know best* is a great excuse when we are suddenly confronted in the street – especially if we don't do much of that either.

But the Gospel story is different. There in the Temple Jesus spots a crippled woman, literally bent double by her condition. Now Jesus wouldn't have just been standing there doing nothing; he was a busy man. But he breaks off from his day and goes to where the woman is. Still she says not a word. And without making any fuss he does what only he could do: he transforms her life, there and then.

Because he noticed and he felt desperately sorry for her. Whatever else he had on his mind, whoever he was about to meet, this crippled woman came first. Quite instinctively she became his priority. It was, quite simply, heart first.

But the story doesn't end there. Because there was bound to be someone to leap on him and tell him off – in this case the leader of the synagogue, quite a big fish. And he rattles off a series of rules and regulations about doing no work on the Sabbath. Quoting Scripture, he has all the reasons under the sun for doing nothing.

When Marcus Rashford makes a fuss about child hunger, he suggests that £20million a week would provide vouchers for every hungry child. They could be distributed through the schools as they were very successfully doing during the last summer holidays. The government response: it isn't the job of teachers to be feeding children.

These Bible stories are not just a reminder of the past but the kind of bubble-pricking, conscience-pricking ideas to encourage us to do what Jesus did: to notice – and to do something – because we are filled with the compassion that motivated him to stop doing what he was meant to be concerned with and to give an otherwise invisible cripple the compassion she deserved.

By chance I was listening to the radio yesterday and heard an interview with the person who started the 'Rainbow in the window' movement. As the discussion developed, she talked about new initiatives, new symbols, to keep the idea alive – pumpkins at Halloween for example – although she wasn't sure what symbol they might use at Christmas...

But what she was touching on was the need for symbols to generate interest in relieving our desperately over-stretched national medical resources: to keep pressing us to challenge our complacency and to let the exhausted hospital staffs know how we value them; to counter the equivalent of the synagogue leader who always had a reason for not doing anything.

And the woman on the radio was right: symbols are really important as tools in the fight against feeling overwhelmed by the difficulties we are facing right now. What can we do with figures like '28million people are currently on heightened coronavirus restrictions'. That is half the country! It's all too much.

For Christians, the greatest symbol of all is the Cross. Of course it means 1001 different things, in lots of different contexts; but at the core of it is the willingness to put other people first: to go beyond the old maxim: 'do to others as you would have them do to you' because, by and large others are in far greater need than we are.

And it all starts with noticing, noticing with an open heart – 'com-passion' – not finding a way to justify doing as little as possible like the law-keepers the world over.

It is worth saying too, that it is compassion that changes society in even greater ways than feeding our hungry children. The stomach turning episode in Paris where a Chechin teenager hacked a teacher to death for talking about – not justifying – the Charlie Hebdo cartoons depicting the Prophet Mohammed in a Danish newspaper, or the planting of a landmine in Kabul which killed scores of children on their way home from school, are all likely to feed our sense that life is disappointing – or worse. We can so easily get the feeling that society is out of control and we can do nothing about it.

The wonderful thing about St Luke's Gospel – the thing which distinguishes it from the other three – is that it is full of stories of compassion. Luke was both a doctor and a man who cared.

His 'take' on Jesus' message was that love and care for one another is key to what God wants of us. As Archbishop Rowan Williams wrote: *You are here today, not because you believe in God but because he believes in you. To you he has entrusted gifts of time and money so that you can help to transform the greyness of these present days into ones where rainbows and pumpkins – and hopefully Christmas stars (and even the Cross) - can shine out as beacons of hope.*

In the words of St Teresa of Avila: *God has no hands, no feet on earth but yours. Yours are the eyes with which He looks his compassion on this world, yours are the feet with which He walks to do good. Yours are the hands, with which He blesses all the world. Yours are his hands, yours are his feet. Christ has no body now on earth but yours.*

St Luke's message exactly, and the antidote to disappointment.