

SERMON FOR ALL SAINTS' SUNDAY | 30.10.2022

Daniel 7: 1-3, 15-18; Ephesians 1: 111-end; St Luke 6: 20-31

I don't know what colour yours is, but mine is orange. And I had not been looking forward to receiving it – 'it' being the envelope from EDF who supply our gas and electricity. But arrive it did on Friday morning and there, amid the wad of incomprehensible figures, was the harsh news that our bill was going to go up substantially - like everyone else's. It was not unexpected but it wasn't exactly welcome either!

Stephen Croft, the Bishop of Oxford (with whom, incidentally, I trained for the priesthood in Durham in the early 1980s) was speaking this week in the House of Lords. His topic was climate change about which he has become something of a campaigner. In his speech – addressed to a government which at the time did not exist – he encouraged ministers to develop some joined up thinking that would help us to alter our behaviour as a nation with regards to energy consumption and he commended a recent report he had co-authored called '*In our hands, behaviour change for climate and environmental goals*'.

The world is agreed, he said, that to avert disaster in our lifetimes, we need to reach net zero in carbon emissions by 2050 or before. This means radical action in this decade and the next – and behavioural change is a key element in that journey. This includes the adoption of new technology, and changing habits and practices around diet, transport, heating and consumption. While each of these behaviour changes will have significant economic benefits they will also require a change of attitude to the way we live which many of us will find irksome. But there can be no ducking the issue: achieving our net zero target will require enormous changes to our energy systems and our infrastructure.

My orange EDF bill was just a sign of that new reality.

Which might seem a strange introduction to the Feast of All Saints' which we keep today. But for me Steve Croft's words offered a way of coping with the uncompromising words of Jesus in today's Gospel. Towards the end of the reading we hear him say: *But I say to you that listen: Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you; bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you...*

Surely some of the hardest sayings in the Gospels?

Hard, but also, I guess, the destination we are all trying to reach? If we are looking for the distinctive quality that people might expect of a Christian, surely it is that ability to forgive and to treat people without lingering resentment? I am still touched by the words of Gordon Wilson whose daughter Marie was killed in Enniskillen in Northern Ireland, 35 years ago, on 8 November 1987. Often called 'the Spirit of Enniskillen', his statement afterwards that *I bear no ill will, I bear no grudge* became one of the most-remembered quotations from the Troubles.

Yet, I wonder, how many of us are able to make such a commitment to loving our enemies? Isn't it too much to ask of us?

I say this because, with the best will in the world, we can't make ourselves love those who hurt us – any more than we can make other people love us if they don't choose to do so. On the other hand, if we are to find a way through to loving those whom we find hurtful and disagreeable – because that is what Jesus is asking of us – then perhaps Steve Croft's report '*In our hands: behaviour change for climate and environmental goals*' might give us a clue to how to take up Jesus' challenge?

In fact our Gospel seems to mirror the direction of Steve's report by suggesting courses of action that will begin to mould us in the right direction. So even just 'doing good' to those who hate us – not throwing back evil for evil – is a pretty good place to start. It might well mean curbing our tongues and not answering back or even smiling when our hearts are full of pain. It might not be full blown loving but even such simple changes in behaviour may well be the beginning of the kind of radical change that Jesus is looking for.

Moreover they also have the positive side effect of training us to do what is right without getting too emotionally attached. Just doing the right thing might well help to protect our thinner skins from being pricked or goaded by those who want to put us down. Blessing those who curse us and praying for those who 'dis' us and give us grief are often good steps 'along the way' to the greater goal of really loving those whom we find difficult. They also have the advantage of stopping us getting bogged down in other people's problems and agendas. We may well be the target of other's people's anger and frustration and not, actually be the reason why they are angry – but of course it is unlikely we will ever know that, one way or the other!

On this All Saints' Day I might well have talked about saints big and small – examples of those who have done their best to love their enemies. But instead I have tried to weave something from Nelson Mandela's insight, printed on the front of your pew sheet, that saints are sinners who keep on trying: that 'we' are sinners who go on trying.

And like the ecological challenges - restrictions on transport, changes to our diet and our need to recycle - our desire to follow the ways of Jesus leads us to also take one tentative step at a time. Alongside our willingness to reduce our energy consumption and to make the kinds of changes that will help the world to reach its target of zero emissions by 2050, so we are each being invited to live the values that Jesus has set for us until the day comes when they too become second nature – and we can genuinely reach out, turning the other cheek with the same passion that we might once have used to put down the person that was hurting us.

And in slowly becoming those sorts of generous people, so we are caught up in the great family of men and women the world over who Daniel describes in his vision: *the holy ones of the Most High God who will possess the Kingdom for ever and ever.* We have our ultimate goals, our destination: to love our enemies and those who don't care about us; but we also know it will take time. It may be rather imperfect love but that is still better than no love at all!

Like our efforts to stem global warming, the changes won't come easily – and certainly not overnight - but that is no excuse not to do all we can, whenever we can. It's in our hands.

If anyone strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also; and from anyone who takes away your coat do not withhold even your shirt. Give to everyone who begs from you; and if anyone takes away your goods, do not ask for them again. Do to others as you would have them do to you.

As Fred Pratt Green says in his famous /our Offertory/ Hymn:

**In loving, in living, saints prove it is true
the way of self-giving, Lord, leads us to you!**