

SERMON FOR ADVENT 2 | 04.12.2022

Malachi 3: 1-4, St Matthew 2: 27-28, 33-34, 37-39

Where do you come from? No, where do you really come from?

Of all the phrases of 2022, these few words - spoken in Buckingham, Palace at a party for a charity which would never otherwise have been reported in the press - will go down in history. Not because of the person who said them particularly (Lady Susan Hussey) or even the person to whom they were said (Ngozi Fulani) or even the domestic abuse charity of which she was the CEO (Sistah Space) but for the headline in the Evening Standard on Thursday: 'Royal Race Storm: 'My Palace Abuse Ordeal'.

A frontpage headline which shows up so many things within our present society, but most particularly the issues of race, ethnicity and what it means to be British. However inept Lady Hussey may or may not have been - repeating her questions about the background of her guest at the Palace and the seemingly relentless determination to find out Ngozi's racial background - what they typified for some was a barely concealed feeling that if your skin is black or brown, you can't quite fully describe yourself as 'one of us'. You might be born in Hounslow or Hansworth or Huyton (in London, Birmingham or Liverpool) but that still doesn't quite count. The presence of a Mosque, the labelling on takeaway windows describing food sold as Halal, the absolute faux pas of touching someone's hair, are somehow still felt to be alien. The claim by the people of Leicester to be the most cosmopolitan and diverse city in England came in stark contrast to the article about race relations in Switzerland where a local politician pleaded with his nation to tighten even further their immigration rules so that his Alpine community did not go down the same route as countries like the UK. I was shocked yesterday when one of our congregation said that she feared falling in the street here because, as a person of colour, she suspected that people might well walk by on the other side and leave her where she was.

Malachi, preaching 3000 years ago to an Israel very divided on tribal lines, doesn't mince his words. He asks those listening whether they would in any sense be ready for the Lord when he returned in judgement? In the Gospel Jesus calls his listeners hypocrites: they might say all the right things and talk the talk on the outside but, deep down in their hearts, they were full of resentment about people who were different. Jesus' condemnation is withering.

It is wholly appropriate to be baptising new children in Advent. Last year

on this Sunday we welcomed Arlo Goodwin; this year it is Brison Lambert. And no one here is asking 'where do you come from?'

Indeed, as we share the responsibility of nurturing these young people, the voice of the prophets of old can be heard crying out the same message: don't pretend you are ready for the coming of the Lord when, deep down, you cannot and will not welcome every child of God equally; when deep down you are not willing to share your last slice of bread with those whose skin colour, social attitudes and religious beliefs are different from yours.

Have you not picked up the most obvious theme in the Christian story: that none of us - whatever our colour or class - are quite 'at home' in the particular traditions and norms of the society in which we live. We are all wandering Aramaeans. Every baptised Christian is initiated into the family of Jesus 'who had nowhere to lay his head'. Born away from his community in Nazareth because of a Roman census, he was forced to flee into exile almost as soon as he was born by Herod, desperate to wipe out a rival king. His three year teaching ministry was spent travelling from Galilee to Jerusalem and back again, dependant on the generosity of friends, more than once in danger of being stoned to death because of his views - ending up executed by an occupying army and being laid in a borrowed tomb.

However much it looks, the Church cannot be part of the establishment. We have to keep reminding ourselves not to get too complacent: 'we're not stopping' (as the saying goes) 'so we won't be taking our coats off!' We have to be at one distance removed from the rest of society otherwise we just get sucked into looking after ourselves, taking on the prejudices of those around us - with their blatant racism and their lack of care for the elderly and vulnerable.

So as we baptise Brison this morning, we offer him a bit of an uncomfortable journey because turning to Christ, refusing to be sucked into the usual 'looking after no 1' culture, is not easy.

But as Jesus stood looking over Jerusalem which he loved, bemoaning the way the people there abused and rejected the prophets and those who were different, we can still hear his love shining through. God doesn't give up on us because we are blind and thoughtless. He just keeps offering us a way back. Can we change if that is what he asks?