

## **SERMON FOR EPIPHANY 4 | 29.01.2023**

I Kings 17: 8-16; I Corinthians 1: 18-31; St John 2: 1-11

I don't think I have ever quoted Shakespeare at the beginning of a sermon before - in our house it is Maria and Sinead who are the great classical theatre buffs – but most of us know that famous speech in 'As you like it' which starts: *All the world's a stage, and all the men and women merely players; they have their exits and their entrances; and one man in his time plays many parts...* It's a great read as Shakespeare talks about our seven ages, the last being like a second childhood: *sans teeth, sans eyes, sans taste, sans everything!*

Strangely, this all came to mind as I was looking at today's Bible readings! Some weeks we seem to have very little to work with and it is hard going trying to work out what God might be saying to us. This week we have almost too much material. But the word I want us to hold on to if we can today is the word 'reality'.

Yesterday morning a very good friend of mine rang from his home near Halifax. He is a priest, almost exactly the same age as me and he told me that after two very difficult years he has been diagnosed with early onset Alzheimer's. And the greatest struggle, he said, was trying to work out what was real and what was yet another lapse of his memory. For someone as precise and careful as Rodney, this had come as a great shock.

But the issue of reality is not entirely new territory for all of us who are people of faith. We are constantly living in two worlds. There is the material world where, by and large, we can be fairly sure of what is going on: we get up out of a familiar bed and we pass the day with objects and people we can usually predict will work in certain ways.

Then there is the spiritual world, the world which God is drawing us to understand more and more but where things do not behave in the same way as in our normal world - and outcomes are not at all predictable. Our prayers for the sick, our intercessions for peace, our caring and our loving for both people we know and don't know are all hedged about with the knowledge that we might or might not be on the right track and we might – or we might not – get what we ask for when we pray.

Elijah, one of my Old Testament super heroes, is having a tough time of it. He has got on the wrong side of King Ahab and Queen Jezebel and he is on the run. Worse, the country is in the middle of a famine and no one has anything to eat. On the face of it he is stuffed.

And then he hears the voice of God. *Go to Zaraphath and I will make sure you are looked after.* Really? But he goes and there he meets a widow collecting sticks for a final meal with her son. Things are obviously desperate but it doesn't stop Elijah pushing his luck: he wants a drink yes - and then as she is leaving he asks for food too.

All on the strength of that inner voice, that spiritual voice from God. *Go to Zaraphath.* Yes, he pushed his luck but his confidence in that still small voice was what gave him the courage; and, as we read, *the oil did not give out* and the three of them, Elijah, mother and son, survived the drought together.

On Tuesday evening, as I have tried to show in the pictures on the front of the **Weekly News**, our kitchen was only just big enough for the dozen or more who came to the first major session of the new Confirmation course. As so often happens it wasn't the presentation that I remembered afterwards so much as the remark from one of the group. I won't embarrass her by naming her but what she said was this: *I come to Church and I meet with people and I learn things. But I don't always feel that I have met with Jesus...*

Let me just allow her words to sink in for a moment. *Having taken the trouble to leave the family in bed and come to St James', I am not sure I always feel that I have met with Jesus.* Let me say at once how grateful I am that she had the courage to express how she felt. And I haven't stopped thinking about it ever since because she has raised so well the issue of reality which is what I want to explore today. And what better than with this wonderful Gospel story.

We don't know why Jesus and his other were invited to the wedding but they weren't on the top table, they were 'just there', enjoying the party like everyone else. And then the moment nobody wants to happen: the hosts have run out of wine! At a Jewish wedding - at almost any wedding - this was unthinkable! But there was no handy supermarket or off license. Whatever were they to do?

Like that lovely AA Milne poem where the king asks the dairy maid and the dairy maid asks the cow *just how were they were to get butter for the royal slice of bread*, a load of murmuring goes on in the wedding feast - which ends up with Mary asking Jesus if he will help? Which is strange because until that moment Jesus hadn't really started his teaching ministry and he certainly hadn't performed any miracles. In fact he didn't stand out in any way from all the other party goers in their special wedding gowns.

**But someone knew what he was capable of, someone trusted him - and that whisper in Mary's ear was all it took.**

***Fill those jars with water*, he says. Which was quite a big job in its own right as the jars were huge and the water had to be fetched. But the servants used what resources they did have - and did as they were asked, all without the majority of the guests having the first clue what was going on. And the rest, as they say, is history: the plain old water from the local well, now turned into wine, was described as being far better than the posh stuff served earlier.**

**And in a matter of moments the crisis was over: the wine flowed, the laughter resumed and Jesus went back to being invisible again – though fortunately the story of the miracle lives on because somebody remembered and St John wrote it down.**

**So where was the reality? For that great man of God, Elijah, the reality wasn't Ahab and Jezebel or even the famine. It was the voice within him encouraging him to push his luck with the widow. In that wedding, where was the reality? It was in the intuition of the MC and Jesus' mother: Jesus might not be wearing a jacket marked 'I can fix this' printed on the back but for those who knew, the landscape was totally transformed when they asked Jesus for help. That was Reality.**

**The reality of the presence and the power of God may not be staring us in the face. Indeed it is always out of sight for we worship the unseen God. But whenever we let him, whether in our Masses or in our private praying, he is there – just as he promised he would be. *Remember*, he said, *I am with you, to the end of the age*. And just in case we find that more difficult, he gives us these physical signs - bread and wine – to help us experience his reality.**

**As Shakespeare so brilliantly tells us, we are just players on a temporary stage, moving from childhood to maturity – and then back again! But if we have eyes to see, veiled but ever present is the one who whispers in our ears words of instruction, words of encouragement – and endless signs of his presence: bread in Zaraphath, wine at the wedding feast; and for each of us...**

**The reason for our being in Church today lies in our willingness to reach out for reality. As St Paul says, *faith may seem like foolishness* – idle, wishful thinking and fantasy. But we know better than that. *We know that God's weakness is stronger than human strength*. Like Elijah and the wedding MC we just need to trust that God will be there when we need him. On life's 'ever changing stage', let's discover together the reality and the generosity of God.**