

## Sermon at St John's on Sunday 1<sup>st</sup> September 2019

*From our epistle:* 'Let mutual love continue. Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it.' (Hebrews 13.1-2)

What does it mean to live together well, after the teaching & example of Jesus Christ?

It's been quite a week for our young people - & those of us privileged to journey with them - on their annual youth residential, this year at the Horstead Centre, in Norfolk. They've lived & worked, & relaxed & prayed, together. They've engaged in all kinds of outdoor team-building activities: from raft building to canoeing, from climbing to foraging & cooking on the camp fire, from problem solving to crate stacking. And I won't tell you which pair succeeded in building together the highest crate stack, before falling off, suspended on a high rope... or which of us got most drenched trying to navigate across the river on a self-made barrel raft! Then there was our pilgrimage to Norwich, in the footsteps of Mother Julian, the 14<sup>th</sup> Century anchorite, and taking in Norwich Cathedral, our young people dressing up (variously) as a mediaeval pilgrim, monk and bishop, much to the amusement of their comrades.

But above all, it was a parable of Christian community – of living together well – as our young people enjoyed each other's company, celebrated each other's gifts, strived to work together well as a team (not least when faced with some genuinely complex challenges, requiring real patience), and lived with difference, in terms of each other's particular personality, quirks & needs. And sitting together, each morning & evening, in our brightly lit chapel, for prayer & reading from the Bible, I was reminded just how much our young people have to teach us – here at St John's – about where the church's future lies. For it is built on each person being accepted for who they are, each person looking out for the other & playing their part, and everyone sharing (as a living, breathing community) in the joy of the Gospel... 'Let mutual love continue.'

What does it mean to live well together, after the Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ?

In our Gospel today, from Luke 14, Jesus paints a picture of what living together well (as Christians) might look like, and it makes for surprising reading - such that the religious leaders of his day were shocked to discover their usual assumptions about respectful behaviour turned on their head; & one can imagine, they didn't like it at all! So what does Jesus say?

For a start, he says, living together well is about humility, about abandoning our usual preoccupation with worldly status; for God's kingdom transforms worldly values and in God's

economy those who take the lowest place will be given the highest honour. So when you are invited to a wedding or a party – Jesus says (& yes, this does assume there isn't a seating plan!) – do not sit down at the top table, but take the lowest place; and who knows, perhaps your host may say to you, 'Friend, move up higher'. So the first quality of living together well is humility; 'the first condition of a joyful life within any community.' Yes, it's about putting the needs of others before ourselves, and in so doing being concerned for the good of all.

Secondly, Jesus says, living together well is about the unexpected treasure of hospitality – and not just sharing hospitality with those who may be like us (although I always find, in reality, that the church is a lot more diverse than we assume), but giving and receiving hospitality from those who are different: the poor, those with special needs, those on the margins of society. 'When you give a lunch or dinner' Jesus says, 'do not invite your friends or relatives or rich neighbours, in case they may invite you back and you would be repaid. But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame and the blind. And you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you.' And remember, in Biblical language, a wedding banquet is always a symbol not just of human hospitality, special that this is, but of so much more: the future kingdom of God, the heavenly banquet, breaking into our midst. So hospitality, Jesus is saying – & especially to those on the margins – really matters, for it is a gateway to the kingdom of God.

And if Jesus, in Luke, opens up (in parables) the themes of humility and hospitality – keystones of living together well – then Hebrews 13, our epistle, takes them further, sketching out the lifestyle and values of those who live their lives on the self-emptying Gospel of Jesus. 'Let mutual love continue. Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers...' Yes, Hebrews takes hospitality to a new level, dramatically suggesting the effect of this divine hospitality, when he says 'for by doing that some have entertaining angels without knowing it.' There is clearly an echo here to the hospitality of Abraham (in Genesis 18) who, with his wife Sarah, provided hospitality to three visitors, who turned out to be angels, sent by God to give them a message of hope for the future.

How often, today, in modern Britain, we fall into living lives that are isolated and disconnected from each another, when at any moment we have the opportunity – in sharing giving & receiving hospitality – to receive the Lord himself, speaking through each other, and his holy angels, coming to us in disguise, as the stranger in our midst. As one commentator puts it, 'Christian hospitality is not just an act of kindness but a way of receiving the Lord himself into [our] home'. How good, then, that starting today, with the simple act of sharing coffee together afterwards, we will be re-energising our hospitality, through our Church and new Centre, to welcome in all kinds of people, whom we don't yet know, perhaps entertaining angels without knowing it.

So what does it mean to live well together, after the Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ? Today we stand poised on the eve of a new School year, and at the start of a new season in the life of St John's... And as we look out across our world today – at the divisions facing our society, still conflicted about what our future will look like; let alone at the destruction of the Amazon rain forests; and at human conflict in many parts of the world – the question could not be more pressing. How do we live together well: with one another, with our environment, with those of differing beliefs, with fellow human beings, whose lives are affected by our actions, whether we like it or not?

And this is where the Gospel shows us another way, and the experience of our young people (this week) in Norfolk reminds us of a simple truth, at the heart of our faith: namely that we need each other, we all belong together; everyone has dignity as a beloved child of God, and in welcoming each other – and the stranger in our midst – we welcome Christ, who transforms our church that it may be radiant with the light of his kingdom, breaking into our world today. Yes, in humbly beholding one another, in letting mutual love continue, in sharing hospitality, in reaching out to those in need, and in living our lives centred (not on ourselves but) on the unceasing praise of God, Christ is formed in us. Christ who is the same, yesterday, today and forever. Our lives a living breathing overflowing Temple to his glory.

One of the joys of being the Church, and not just a group of individual worshippers, is that here we are formed into a community – a living Body – to be Christ in the world. And we come from different places and with different gifts & stories to share. And as we discover each other, and find joy and laughter together, we open outwards, to draw others in. And so we are transformed by hospitality & friendship & community, into being salt and light in the world today, open to God's promised future. A living parable of Communion...

So may we, in this new School year, young and old, rich and poor, able bodied and disabled, from wherever we come, in all our rich diversity, in health and in sickness, in joy and in sorrow, in hope and in faith, discover Christ in one another and serve the common good.