

Reflective Worship – Sunday 2nd August

Sermon – Paul Day

Reading – Matthew 25:31-46

At our reflective worship last month Sarah was talking about how we care for each other. Practical things like phoning people to check they are OK, doing shopping, making knitted dolls for the NHS heroes and much more. She spoke too about how that practical help can extend beyond those we know or even know of to, for example, the unknown clients at the foodbank who receive the benefits of our gifts of food and money.

Caring seems to be a natural human response when we see or hear of someone in need. We can see this not just at an individual level, but also at a community level. I am involved with the Shirley Mutual Aid group which sprung up when the lockdown began. Over 100 volunteers have offered time and help and contact to anyone who needs it. People running errands, making phone calls, organising book and jigsaw exchanges and seed and plant swaps. More than 300 local residents have been helped over the past months. We can see this kind of reaction on a larger scale when there is a natural disaster of some kind, or through events like Children in Need. We see images of particular people in need and we respond to them.

Today we are thinking about our Christian calling not simply to care, but also to act to bring about a more just and fair society. The move from caring to action may seem to be a simple step, but it's one that can raise all kinds of questions. We often hear it said that bishops and church leaders should not get involved in politics, and it is taking this step from caring to action that sometimes brings this response. The Brazilian catholic archbishop Dom Helder Camara said *"When I give food to the poor, they call me a saint. When I ask why they are poor, they call me a communist."*

The Gospel is not about being nice; it is about being honest and just, and the world doesn't like those two things very much.

The Bible contains many passages that present God's vision of what the world should be like:

In Micah –

*He shall judge between many peoples,
and shall arbitrate between strong nations far away;
they shall beat their swords into ploughshares,
and their spears into pruning-hooks;
nation shall not lift up sword against nation,
neither shall they learn war any more;
but they shall all sit under their own vines and under their own fig trees,
and no one shall make them afraid;
for the mouth of the Lord of hosts has spoken.*

And also from Micah, the hope of a just society

*He has told you, O mortal, what is good;
and what does the Lord require of you
but to do justice, and to love kindness,
and to walk humbly with your God?*

And in Isaiah:

*The wolf shall live with the lamb,
the leopard shall lie down with the kid,
the calf and the lion and the fatling together,
and a little child shall lead them.
The cow and the bear shall graze,
their young shall lie down together;
and the lion shall eat straw like the ox.
The nursing child shall play over the hole of the asp,
and the weaned child shall put its hand on the adder's den.
They will not hurt or destroy
on all my holy mountain;
for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord
as the waters cover the sea.*

And in the New Testament – in Mary's song, the Magnificat

*He has shown strength with his arm;
he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.
He has brought down the powerful from their thrones,*

*and lifted up the lowly;
he has filled the hungry with good things,
and sent the rich away empty.*

And in Jesus' own teaching of what he called the Kingdom of God – we can see this throughout the gospels and perhaps particularly in the sermon on the mount in Matthew's gospel.

Holding on to this vision of what the world could be like is vital as it gives us the end point to aim at. Without it we might look at the world around us and be filled with despair at what it is like, but with the vision we can instead have hope at what things could be like and be spurred to work towards the fulfilment of that vision.

Martin Luther King understood this well when he gave his famous "I have a dream speech"

I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the colour of their skin but by the content of their character.

I have a dream that one day down in Alabama little black boys and black girls will be able to join hands with little white boys and white girls as sisters and brothers. I have a dream today.

So if our vision, our dream, is of a world of justice and of peace; a world where people are seen to be of equal value; a world where truth and honesty are seen as virtues; a world where we prioritise our responsibilities over our rights then what are we called to do to help bring it about?

And the answer to that of course is very personal. We are each in different situations – and only we can decide what we can do. The other thing to remember of course is that we won't ever see that full vision brought about, but we can move towards it. This world will never be the perfect world that God's vision portrays, but that shouldn't stop us acting. Even small contributions mark a positive step.

You have probably heard the starfish story:

A young girl was walking along a beach upon which thousands of starfish had been washed up during a terrible storm. When she came to each starfish, she would pick it up, and throw it back into the ocean. People watched her with amusement.

She had been doing this for some time when a man approached her and said, "Little girl, why are you doing this? Look at this beach! You can't save all these starfish. You can't begin to make a difference!"

The girl seemed crushed, suddenly deflated. But after a few moments, she bent down, picked up another starfish, and hurled it as far as she could into the ocean. Then she looked up at the man and replied, "Well, I made a difference for that one!"

So here are some things that we could do. Small things that can be steps at least towards the vision.

The first is to be aware of what is happening – locally, nationally and internationally. To make of a point of reading beyond the headlines and finding out the things that are not always reported. And that can be hard. Especially in times like these when it appears that all the news is about the virus. But the other issues – refugees, war, homelessness, poverty, lack of healthcare – the list goes on and on – are still around us. It takes a bit of effort to find out.

An example from my own reading the news beyond the headlines might be a useful illustration here. The Covid crisis has led to a downturn in economic activity. The UK's aid budget is calculated as a percentage (0.7%) of our GDP. This year because of the crisis GDP is falling. Just before Parliament rose for the summer recess Dominic Raab announced a cut in the aid budget of £2.9 billion because GDP was falling. This cut, he declared, would maintain our commitment of a 0.7% spend on aid. But is it just and fair that those most in need across the world should be affected in this way?

Key to any action though is that we have to be willing to put ourselves out. Maybe that's to change the way we live. We might look at the effects of climate change and decided that we are going to use less energy, get an electric car, not travel on planes, walk rather than drive to the shops, use less plastic, buy locally produced food. And these types of things may cost us in terms of money, time and effort.

Perhaps we would look at the poverty and destitution around the world and decide that we could easily live without those new clothes or the latest kitchen appliance, and instead give to a charity that helps those in the developing world. Maybe we need to think about where the money we pay for certain goods actually ends up. Is it with the owners of multi-national companies or with the people who produce the goods. Think of those fashion items made in sweat shops in the far east. The fair trade foundation is a good place to start here – many items carry the Fair Trade mark which confirms that the suppliers have received a fair deal. It may cost us more but is that really such a problem?

We have to be willing to make a stand. To stand up and be counted. This might mean talking to friends about the things that concern us. It may mean going on a demonstration to show the depth of feeling there is to change things. It may mean lobbying or asking awkward questions of our member of Parliament, or the CEO of a major company about things that are happening. It may mean taking an interest in and promoting the work of charities like Christian Aid or TEAR fund.

But surely for all of us the one thing we can do is pray. Whenever we pray the Lord's Prayer we pray for the coming of the Kingdom – for the vision to become a reality. We can pray for specific people, specific situations; we can pray for political leaders and industrialists whose decision can make a direct difference; we can pray for those who suffer or who see little hope. And in our prayers we can listen for God's prompting. Listen for pointers for what we might do and how we might act.

So the key for us as Christians is to always hold that vision of the Kingdom before us. That vision of justice and peace and truth and of all people being made in God's image. And to work out how we can take steps to help bring that vision to reality.

The parable of the sheep and the goats which was our reading this evening might help us here as it encourages us to see Jesus all around us. To see that in what we do and what we don't do to others we are doing or not doing to him.