



being generous, being open, being grateful

I don't know about you, but I would have loved to have been there when once again the religious authorities were determined to undermine Jesus' authority and once again Jesus managed to undermine their authority instead. It's no longer the chief priests and the elders – it is now the Pharisees' turn to try their luck at catching Jesus out. I wonder when Jesus asked them for a coin, did they have one? Did one of them admit to carrying round a coin with Caesar's head on it, or did they have to find someone in the crowd? Jesus, as an itinerant, dependant on other people's hospitality, was not able to produce one.

Then, when the Pharisees asked Jesus what they believed to be an impossible question to answer, just so wanting to catch him out, Jesus tells them that, yes, we need to fulfil our civic duties. Though more importantly, as creatures who are bearers of God's image, we are called to fulfil our duty to others, to live under the authority of God, a greater authority than that of the land and of the law. I imagine the Pharisees and the Herodians just shaking their heads with amazement, disbelief, shock, maybe even some admiration.

And what would have been my reaction, I wonder? Perhaps not then, but sometime later, reflecting on the exchange, would I have been able to take on board what Jesus was really saying? To me, his response is immensely challenging and ties in with the reading from Paul to the Thessalonians which we heard earlier. Paul affirms the community because they have turned from idols to a serve a living and true God – others around them know this because their behaviour is consistent with what they profess to believe.

I was struck by a question Pope Francis asked recently (in his writing that is, not to me personally!): *“Is the effect of our encounter with Jesus Christ evident in our relationship with the world around us?”* (*LaudatoSi'*, #217). In other words, when people look at us, is it clear that we have a relationship with Jesus? Is it evident that we have prayed, and reflected, and inhabited the Gospels? In this era of reality TV, if we had a 24 hour camera on us, would our faith be shown by the way we live?

What might it mean for us to turn from idols and serve a living God? What might it mean to really live out our identity as people who belong to God, as people made in God's image? There are many ways of course, but this morning I would like to suggest three. We live out our identity as God's beloved by being generous, by being open, and by being grateful.

First, we live as a people belonging to God when we are **generous**. Those of you who were here a few weeks ago will know that our altar cloth here at St James' was taken by a man who is homeless. He was quite young, apparently, heavily tattooed, and wore jeans with nothing on his top. He went straight up to the altar, took the cloth off and wrapped it around himself and walked out. How would you have reacted I wonder? Would you have condemned or condoned him? Would you have been scandalised by his action or scandalised that someone in present day London had no shirt on his back? There is no doubt that he stole our altar cloth. Technically he took what was not his. At that moment though, did he need the altar cloth more than our Church? I think so. And when I heard this story I was reminded of the words

of St John Chrysostom when he said to his fourth century congregation: *“What is the use of providing the table with cloths woven of gold thread, and not providing Christ himself with the clothes he needs?”*

This story is challenging for us. It challenges us at a very deep level, a gut level about what is ours, what we own, what we possess. But the truth is that everything belongs to God. Everything has been given to us and we are called to imitate the generous abundance of God with all those we meet. This doesn't just mean giving money – some of us here don't have much. However, we can give of our time, our love and our attention. The greatest gift we can possibly give another is simply to be fully present to them. In this way we imitate God's passionate care for each and every person. I am mindful of the words of William Tyndale, a leading figure in Protestant reformation, who said: *“We are delivered by Christ from slavery into freedom; and that freedom is experienced and expressed as indebtedness not to God, but to each other.”* We are called to be generous.

Second, we show that we belong to God by being **open**, by holding on to things lightly. I went to a conference recently where the person organising the event lost her notes – she eventually found them put safely away in a file. She declared on finding them: *“I lose things because I don't want to lose them”*.

This got me thinking about how we do that in our lives – we hold on to things too tightly, we cling, we grab, we possess. We claim ownership and it doesn't bring us peace, or happiness. It often makes us anxious. This can happen both with material things *and* in our relationships – we lose the very one we want to keep by clinging too tightly. I have been lucky enough, at certain points in my life, to be able to go on silent retreats. Whenever I arrived at the retreat house I would have an image of myself as a tightly curled fist, and slowly, over the five, six, seven days, I would feel myself uncurling, opening out to God. It is really hard to remain uncurled when we experience life as busy,

demanding and relentless, but the secret is maybe to find people and places where we can open out – open out to receive as well as to give.

Third, we live as a people belonging to God when we are **grateful**. As I am sure you know, the word Eucharist means thanksgiving. Even if we forget to be grateful all week, coming to Church on a Sunday is a great time to remind ourselves of all that we have been given. I am sure the fact is not lost on you that the man who came into this Church with no shirt, took the altar cloth – the cloth on which we place the bread and the wine, the cloth which drapes the altar where we gather, and around which we listen to the words “take and eat”. In the Eucharist, we look back at the past and remember Jesus's words and his life of service. We also look forward to a time when all will be invited to gather round the table, when all will find a place of belonging, where there will be enough food, clothing and shelter for everyone. As the author Margaret Scott says:

“For the Eucharist is about eating together, about widening the tent and extending the table, making the table communal and therefore round – with no top and no bottom and no sides – a table as big as the whole world, a table for the Eucharistic community that listens to the voices of those who seek food in their hunger, justice in their oppression, consolation in their pain, and reconciliation in their alienation”. I like her image for the table as big as the whole world though it might prove to be a very expensive altar cloth!

This morning, we have explored three ways in which we can show that our lives belong to God – through being generous, through being open, and through being thankful. Even in these three areas, it's a real struggle sometimes to discern what it means to be a follower of Christ. I do think we are lucky though here at St James' to have spaces where we can wrestle, discuss and share the journey with others – spaces such as Vagabonds, or the Camino course, or the

sessions on Luke that we ran in August and September. I encourage you to seek out these spaces and, with others, to ask for the grace to become, slowly and gently, a little more generous, a little more trusting, a little more grateful.

In the words of Patriarch Bartholomew from the Eastern Orthodox Church, may we all learn to “gradually move away from what I want, to what God’s world needs.” Amen.

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