



6th September 2020

St James's Piccadilly - 13th Sunday After Trinity

'Wherever two or three are gathered': A re-education of the heart.

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I've been away for a couple of weeks. I can safely report that camping went really well. For the first few days or so. Until the tent collapsed. In one go. In the middle of the night. In the rain. We made it back okay. The tent, did not. It went straight to recycling heaven.

My only message today is that the new "normal" we are moving into is going to require of us, as a church congregation, being more LOVING, more GIVING, more FORGIVING. And that living up to this is going to require A RE-EDUCATION OF THE HEART.

That is the point, I think, in today's Gospel message, when Jesus says to his disciples: "Wherever two or three are gathered in my name, there I am in their midst."

I have in mind the social, interpersonal cost of learning to live with the COVID virus. There is a cost to the quality of our relationships. I, for one, miss the spontaneity, and ease, and warmth meeting people over coffee face-to-face. What about our Harvest lunch? How exactly do you do that? And accommodate the necessary hygiene routines. And social distancing. And so on?

How do we reorder our way of doing things so as to give expression to Christ in our midst, whatever the cost?

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This reflection comes from an unexpected place.

I spoke to someone the other day who makes his living as a driver for a car company. I asked him about his experience of lockdown. And how it's been coming back into work as London begins rolling back into working life. He said words to this effect:

"You know, looking back, the truth is I really needed the break. ... Furlough hasn't been easy. But I was getting out to work at 6am for thirty years. Six days a week. It was the routine I was used to. And now I ask myself, why? I'm getting back to work now. But I have more time with my family. I have both my grown kids running their work from home, my home! because they haven't got the space where they live. And it's a pain. But I wouldn't want it any other way."

There is something there about the re-ordering of priorities. At least in this one person's experience. As it happens, though, over the summer months, I have talked to a handful of people expressing similar feelings.

Of course, I have to be very careful here: the unwanted and unwelcome disruption to working life has had unbearable consequences for many. And this includes people we know personally. That much is true.

So, to be clear, there is a serious and negative economic equation to living with the virus. And for some more than others.

I think of musicians (maybe specially because it isn't my field), professional singer, session musicians supplementing

their living with teaching. And very much dependent on person to person contact, the very thing the presence of the virus makes difficult at this time.

But there again, someone who came to visit our church during times for private prayer a few weeks ago, had this to say:

“Furlough hasn’t been good. But it has been good to stop. I’ve had time to re-think how I’m living my life. The things I value. What I give to the people I love. And how I spend my time.”

It’s anecdotal; a particular person, in particular circumstances, who — in the midst of the complexities of reduced work and reduced income has experienced a REORDERING OF PRIORITIES. And who has experienced, it sounds like, some necessary breathing space.

Again, to be absolutely clear, the pandemic been an economic disaster, and it has been an emotional disaster for many.

Susan Sontag (in her essay, [‘Illness as Metaphor’](#), 1978) comments on the way in which illness in general has a tendency to expose our character fractures:

“Illness,” she writes, “is the night-side of life, a more onerous citizenship. Everyone who is born holds dual citizenship, in the kingdom of the well and in the kingdom of the sick. Although we all prefer to use the good passport, sooner or later each of us is obliged, at least for a spell, to identify ourselves as citizens of that other place.”

But this pandemic has also turned up a diagnosis on the ills of our society. It has revealed that society is poorly. Cracks in the society have shown us that some communities have been more susceptible to the virus than others.

And he disparities and inequalities of who is and is not at liberty to work from home are painfully clear. Some are more at leisure to work from home. Some work is less flexible than others. Some work puts people at risk, daily.

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I count myself one of the lucky ones, teaching and supervising my students online since late March. And yet, over the summer, staff at my university agreed an across-the-board twenty-percent pay cut. No one thinks a 20% off one’s income is an ideal solution. But the point is, we know that other people are having it far worse. And we know the pay cut means that everyone gets to keep their jobs in a lean year for students going to university. And so we begin the academic year with the satisfaction of doing what we know is the morally right thing to do.

Universities are places that thrive on rank and competition. But in Canterbury we are living a complete reordering of our values as an institution. We are living A RE-EDUCATION OF THE HEART.

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That is the point in today’s Gospel: “Wherever two or three are gathered in my name, there I am in their midst” assumes another person in the conversation, another person in the room, and therefore another set of priorities ... about what is important. What is worth our time. What needs our attention most. And why.

Remember we, as we gather week on week around our Eucharist, say this prayer:

Christ has died.
Christ is risen.
Christ will come again.

And, of course, the unspoken rejoinder to that is ...

And that changes everything!

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This assumes certain relational priorities. For when Jesus says “Wherever two or three are gathered in my name, there I am in their midst,” he means to put into perspective the fact that WE ARE GOD’S SOCIAL CAPITAL in this city, in this society, in this world.

And this assumes a costly economy of relationships. Let’s not miss that whole premise in the Gospel passage we heard is conflict resolution in church relationships. This is the people side of the equation: To be God’s currency in our relationships involves a having-to-be-more-forbearing, more patient, more lenient, more-easily-forgiving side of the equation.

Peter, Christ’s disciple, clocks this straight away. And he questions Jesus on this. When he “Wherever two or three are gathered in my name, just assume that there is another person in the room: for there I am there with you,” ... Peter says: Hold on. This is about living with conflict, isn’t it. About causing offense. Seeking forgiveness. And making amends.

And so in the conversation that follows (the part we didn’t read) Peter says:

Just so I’m clear: how much do I have to forgive my apologetic neighbour’s wrongdoing?

Jesus famously answer:

“Try seventy times seven.
Start with that.”
(para. Matthew 18.21-22).

Being God’s SOCIAL CAPITAL is built on forgiveness and reconciliation. On putting what’s important into perspective. And maybe sometimes simply on the willingness to overlook an offence and rise above.

Let me shift gears ... and end with this reflection.

St Jerome—in the 5th century—reflected on a pandemic in his generation, a condition indifferent to character or qualities of persons, to social standing or class: one day it was simply there, he says, “[as one] pregnant with its own death.”

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Fast-forward to the late 20th century. And again you find an epidemic turning up a diagnosis on the times. I’ve been thinking at this time of Arthur Ashe. We didn’t have Wimbledon this year. We’ll have to try again this time next year. But we do get the US Open, for those of us who care about these things, in New York, at the Arthur Ashe stadium.

Arthur Ashe was the Black-American tennis player who refused to discuss how he had acquired HIV. We learned only after Ashe’s death about the complications from an operation and a blood transfusion. But I remember watching Arthur Ashe on television, going public with his condition, and pushing back against the stigma. And putting on a quiet dignity in the fight against prejudice and against moral judgement as a person living with HIV in the late 80s.

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A generation before, Thomas Mann, wrote about TB, the pandemic of the turn of the century, in his novel, *The Magic Mountain* (1924).

The patients, are convalescing in a sanatorium high up in the Swiss Alps, away from all connection with society. Some have been there for years; some will never leave. And some are trying to squeeze into an abbreviated life a kind of life they might have otherwise had.

One night, they put on a masked ball. They put on costumes, and glasses, and wigs. They put on accents. They put on attitudes. They put on airs. The whole dialogue is written in French, because it's the kind of highfalutin that suits their theme.

And for one night, the TB patients forget the bottles and drips and sputum trays and needles and cures. They forget the life-sentence hanging over their heads.

That grasp every moment,—for one night — with the champagne in full flow — trying to make the most of what they know will be lives cut short. Savouring the lives they imagine what they might have lived. They allow themselves indiscretions; they say the wrong thing; they steal a kiss from the wrong person; they flirt with people they ordinarily avoid in the halls.

They imagine how they might love, if they were free to love without the fear.

And it's all in good fun. But what they discover—if only for that moment—is that that is who they really are. Their passions are real. Their will to live to the end is real. Their desire to love is not imagined, but real.

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There is no law against love, says the apostle Paul: There is no law against love because love is the very point of the law.

And so, exactly at the point when you and I are most tempted to be risk averse, ... and like Peter, realising that living in community entails conflict, forgiveness, and difficult conversations, ... and just when it seems all too much and we just want to shrink back into the safety of our personal bubbles ... there is St Paul, in today's reading, urging on onward, perhaps in lofty, theological term, but with grit and determination saying to us:

“Salvation is nearer to us NOW than when we first believed.”

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Some of went with our friend Monica to her immigration tribunal. Monica presented herself as she really is: a woman of courage, and strength, and self-assurance. That's what Monica brought before the judge. The solicitor that with her, at the end of what was the better part of a day, gathered all of us outside the court room and said, Monica, you were great presenting your case; and all of you who came for support, did great to be with your friend. Now go and enjoy the rest the day. GO AND LIVE YOUR BEST LIFE!

I'm taking that cue. And so this morning as you gather around the Eucharist, I would like you to take that person who has been received in Christ, who has been fed, take that person back to your seat, and think about how you plan TO LIVE YOUR BEST LIFE. GO AND LIVE THE RE-EDUCATION OF THE HEART that is St James's Piccadilly. GO AND LIVE IN LOVE!

Amen.

[Romans 13.8–14 / Matthew 18.15–20](#)