



13th September 2020
The 14th Sunday After Trinity
Sermon – St James's Piccadilly
The Revd Lucy Winkett

*May I speak in the name of God – Creator,
Christ and Holy Spirit.*

There's an in-joke told amongst vicars about taking services from the 1662 Book of Common Prayer. Of course the poetry is wonderful, the vocabulary is beautiful, if challenging sometimes, and for many Church of England parishes and cathedrals, apart from Evensong, the main time it's used for services is early in the morning on a Sunday – something like a communion service at 8 o'clock.

With a busy day ahead, sometimes, the vicar's concentration isn't what it should be. The thing is that the Lord's Prayer occurs twice in the Book of Common Prayer Communion Service. Once at the very beginning and once near the end. If the vicar knows the service well by heart, and isn't concentrating, and this has happened more than once, they may think that the second time they are saying it is actually the first – and so as the prayer ends, they set off to start the service all over again. The helpless congregation can find themselves locked in a kind of Groundhog Day loop tape of a communion service that they can never

escape. Church going round and round for ever....

One of the features of the lockdown for many people was that we changed our relationship to time itself. For any working from home, the boundaries became blurred; it wasn't easy to know when you were at work or not. For those on furlough or home schooling or shielding or simply being more at home than they had ever been before, the usual markers of time; the ways that days used to be measured were changed beyond recognition. If home itself was not safe, then this became a torture without end. For those who worked throughout, they found that work was harder, shifts longer, the usual supermarket shop they did on their way home presented them with empty shelves. Time became so pressured because it became short.

And for some who struggled for breath in ICU wards, time became a tortuous war against sickness that seemed never to end. And for 917,000 people worldwide, time became their path to eternity as in one moment they slipped or fought their way through death to what was beyond.

The emergence of Covid 19 combined with our attempts to suppress it has affected all

of us in unforeseen ways. And one of these has been in our experience of, use of, attitude towards, time.

For Christian communities, such as the one Paul was writing to in Rome 2,000 years ago, understanding developed gradually that while we live our lives in time, this time isn't just one thing after another; eternity is now and we live in the light of it now. This service looks solid enough – here we all are –the paving stones are here beneath our feet. Here we are being church outside the church - making a noise in the centre of town. But this is a sacramental place, a liminal, a creative boundary place, not just because we are quite literally between the street and the church but because we are present now in a sacrament where all time is present now.

This might feel too abstract – so how can we express this in words? By remembering the truth that so many stories and echoes, songs and conversations are here now today. This sacrament, this communion takes place at the crossroads between time and eternity. Your life story is held here; and there are here in this sacrament layers and layers of stories and meaning.

We will hear the incomparable music from 900 years ago Hildegard of Bingen; visionary writer of music like no other in her generation. Her voice sings out here leaping across the centuries to this Eucharist where all days and all lives are present. Harry

Emerson Fosdick, who wrote our first hymn – preached such a powerful anti-war sermon in New York in 1933 that the vicar of our neighbour St Martin in the Fields Dick Sheppard wrote to him and the Peace Pledge Union was formed. Martin Luther King Junior called Harry Fosdick 'the greatest preacher this century' and so when we hear this hymn later, our voices join with the civil rights movement and the Baptist inspiration of both those courageous men. When our singers sing our final song *siyahamba* *ekukenyenkwenkos* in its English translation, we sing a Zulu folk song transcribed in the 1950s but whose language and rhythms link us to the history of Africa and the struggle against apartheid in South Africa. Julie Cunningham will dance today after this sermon in this courtyard space. Their piece embodies Queer gesture – something we can't recognise – in expressing that every moment of one life is lived in every moment; or to put it in a Scriptural way – all time is here, we live not only on this day and in this hour but all hours are present here.

This perspective on time and eternity that Christianity can offer a fractious, often terrified, always complex society affects everything. We're not messing about here. The challenges we face are huge and Christ's eternal presence in time invites in us the creative ability to face these

challenges. All of eternity is in a grain of sand says William Blake – all life is present in this death says St Paul.

Paradox is our native language.

And the parable – the short story or one act play that Jesus created that we heard read - is brilliant. Of course it's disturbing. At first glance it's the stuff of nightmares: an omnipotent and colossal God condemns a man who made a mistake to torture – which is against not only the Geneva convention but contemporary Jewish law – and death. It's a slam dunk. Critics of Christianity have their man. That's why Christianity is not to be taken seriously – phew – it's as I thought - God's mean, unpredictable and to be honest, this is all borne out by the behaviour of actual people who actually go to church in diminishing numbers – because they're pretty judgemental themselves. Now I can see why if they take this sort of stuff seriously. This Christianity is not only untrue but damaging.

But in listening to this troubling and disturbing parable, our first mistake, admittedly led into it by the gospel writer's final interpretative line – is our inability to do anything but anthropomorphise God. Despite our best efforts, (and honestly this story doesn't really help us with this), we probably really imagine that, when we're dealing with God, we're dealing with someone essentially like us, only bigger.

We know about the vengeful feelings we have; anger, resentment, fury, violence, jealousy; the alarming and merciless destructive parts of ourselves, often towards ourselves if not others. And we imagine therefore that God's wrath is like that, only bigger – which makes it even more violent and more frightening.

And we end up with a God that is to be feared more than loved, whose capacity for cruelty is unlimited and ungovernable and that we are at the mercy of that powerful whimsical God.

But crucially, one of the most important things Christian theology wants to say about God is that God emphatically isn't like us only bigger. God is unlike: is other, utterly holy. The Creator completely given-over to relationship with creation: the undefended and undefeated God we celebrate in this Eucharist. And this perspective transforms what we might think of as God's wrath.

The American novelist Wendell Berry has written:

'To think of oneself as an agent of God's anger is exceedingly attractive....there are certain intense pleasures in anger, especially if one's own anger can be presumed to coincide with God's, and also in the use of

an angry self righteousness as a standard by which to condemn other people.

(Wendell Berry from the introduction to *My Mercy Encompasses All* by Reza Shah – Kazemi published Counterpoint Berkeley 2007)

The clue in taking this parable in, is not primarily in the final sentence to torture, but in the first conversation between the king and the servant: Mercy, release, forgiveness; this is the action of God. And all these conversations, events, judgements and mercies happen at the same time.

Christianity invites us to encounter a God who is not distant, uninvolved, cool uninterested but God who weeps with those who weep – including you and me. Who rejoices with those who rejoice – including you and me.

If I have learned to trust God, then I will not be afraid to encounter a God whose anger will not destroy me but will reveal to me – to us - the injustices we collude in, however shameful, the waste and cruelty I tolerate or promote. I am provoked and moved by a Christian image of God who weeps with frustration and fury at my inability to grasp the depth and richness of living; who despairs at my reductionism, at our religiosity, more preoccupied with lists of stuff we believe or don't believe than lament at our cruelty and neglect, towards

ourselves, towards others, toward the planet itself. God who longs for me to make even a tentative and joyful commitment day after day after day to love and forgive and be loved and forgiven for ever and for ever, and is faithful to me when I fail over and over again to live this out.

This parable, discomfiting and unsettling as it is confronts us with huge questions that are utterly relevant today.

Who among us does not recognise Jesus's brilliant story telling - that when we are unable to let go of a long held bitterness or resentment, when we hold on for what we think is dear life, we are in fact holding onto deathly resentment that sometimes can only be described as in this parable as tortuous? This can be towards ourselves too: a relentless hammering away at ourselves, unable to forgive, unable to move on.

And this parable is so discomfiting because it hides within it the truth that the reason I need mercy from God, from other people constantly and from myself, is because I make choices every day. I wouldn't need mercy if I didn't have power and agency in the world. It is in the exercise of our power and choice that we inevitably make mistakes, make bad choices, take a path that is perilous for us or for the ones we love. And therefore, it's no wonder I might become reluctant to pray or find prayer

difficult because this parable faces me with a bracing truth:

God's mercy, as expressed in this parable, addresses me at the point of my power to act, and reveals to me my capacity for mistakes or betrayal or, to use the theological word, sin.

But if that weren't enough, it gets harder.

Not only are we addressed in this parable as people with power to act, and with the opportunity to forgive should we take it, but we are addressed as people in need of forgiveness ourselves.

We are addressed in this parable as human beings who are both powerful and needy. It's often hard for us to reconcile ourselves to being either of those things.

But if that weren't enough, it gets harder still:

Because thirdly, when those two attributes operate together, our power and our need; we discover our own identity not as victims which is morally preferable to us, easier to inhabit, but as perpetrators. The things we have done and the things we have left undone.

Contemplating the mercy of God in this parable brings us into close proximity with

our power, our need and our mistakes. Otherwise no mercy would be needed in the first place. No wonder we prefer our own illusions of God – either mean and cruel with total and unpredictable power over us so we have no power at all – or on the other hand the nice placid God that we recruit to our own causes and who will never invite us to change. These fantasies of God are challenged by our encounter with Scripture, difficult and bemusing as it is. As one commentator has put it; Scripture is not of itself counter cultural, but daily encounter with it will make us so. (Tim Gorringer *Furthering Humanity; a theology of culture* Ashgate 2004).

Mercy and truth are met together is a famous line in Scripture because it holds a deep wisdom: if you are a human being, whenever real truth is told - by us or about us- mercy will be needed.

Another way of talking about the truth telling that requires the operation of mercy for it to be bearable is to call it judgement.

Contemporary spirituality, especially in the liberal tradition, and a contemporary cultural landscape finds all this vocabulary difficult and challenging. And because the judgement in this parable has been so abused by church teaching, frightening people into submission, terrifying them with fear of torture and hell, the temptation has

been, still is, to ignore this difficult set of reflections or to dismiss it or to dissolve it.

My suggestion to us is to do none of those things – but if we're feeling able to, to reclaim some of that language in a compassionate, truthful and energising way; to submit ourselves to the judgement of a God we trust. This judgement, this revealing of our identity as powerful, needy and mistake makers - is not exactly a walk in the park but it is at least imaginable, and surviveable. Because the God we trust doesn't so much exercise judgement with mercy, but exercises mercy as judgement.

The French mystic Simone Weil wrote memorably: why should I be anxious? It's not up to me to think of God. It's up to God to think of me.

And Rowan Williams paints a vivid picture; Where we are and who we are is the furnace where the Son of God walks (Silence and Honey Cakes p.98)

In this poetic image – where we are and who we are is the furnace where the Son of God walks – is a picture that captures somehow the paradox of mercy and truth-telling I am reaching for and envisions too the sacrifice of God in Christ being burned for love of my burning soul.

Taking the New Testament as a whole, I believe with all my heart that in this one act play of a parable, there is an act 2, that

takes us back to the beginning of Act 1, a little like the Lord's Prayer recitation I mentioned at the beginning.

The writer of John's gospel made it clear that no book could possibly contain the amazing stories, events, teachings and possibilities of the life of Christ. And so just as all time is present in this sacrament, so all time is present in this reading of Scripture. This man ends the story in a place that I recognise – and I wonder if you do too. That I am capable of grace and forgiveness, that I am able sometimes to let go of resentments and bitterness. But that also present in me at the same time - is the capacity to exercise my power cruelly and selfishly, unaware of or simply unable to accept that I am loved and forgiven and free, created beautifully and wonderfully in the image and likeness of God.

All these moments take place at once. All of these possibilities co exist in me at the same time; and what this parable teaches me is that at the point at which I have power to choose – which you and I do in micro ways every day – God is with me, urging me to act justly, live gently, to forgive as I have been forgiven.

To comment too not just on the personal but on the political; you and I are living in the knowledge of extraordinary challenges that face us, living as we do in time in the light of eternity. The catastrophe that 2/3 of creatures have been made extinct in the last

50 years combined with the catastrophe that because of climate change, it's estimated that 1 billion people will become refugees by 2050.

This church is engaged deeply with both these societal issues; the emergency of the forced migration of people as refugees and the emergency of climate change. And even here, we hear often that these are separate and that some prefer to support one over the other. But they are not separate; they are intimately connected. If our own actions continue to change the climate of the planet, we lay the foundations for a wholesale economy in the trafficking and exploitation of people trapped in desertification and poverty.

This parable lives today in reminding us that our own wilful neglect of climate change has, will have, tortuous consequences for people, not just creatures, and the planet itself. This parable lives today in confronting us with both our need and our power and in the light of this, the judgement and mercy that in God's presence will surely come. And this parable invites us as a church into a faithful following of the joy, the enjoyment of each other most especially across the cultural differences we experience; and of our astonishing planet. We are both tortured by grief at humanity's neglect and cruelty towards other people and towards the planet; at the same time as living in the light

of utter freedom and joy of being alive today under this sky with these precious people.

This is the gospel we proclaim; and I am asking you directly; please pray for our church council and working group as we begin this week to take stock and make plans for our future. Please continue to give of your time, your energy and your money to this church as we re-build community, deepen our mission and expect to be transformed by love.

All life, death and new life is bound up in this liminal boundary sacramental space – in you and me today. Every regret lives alongside every triumph; every act of love alongside our acts of wilful neglect. The wolf lies down with the lamb in the secret places of our hearts. In the light of this gospel, we thank God for the astonishing gift of life; God who knows our despair, who invites us into hope, as we celebrate this Eucharist, knowing that we are fearfully and wonderfully made in the span of our human life and in the light of all eternity.

Let us pray

Prayer based on psalm 25 which is printed at the end of the service sheet for you to take into your week.

To you O Love, I lift up my soul!

O Heart within my heart, in you I place my trust.

Let me not feel unworthy; let not fear rule over me.

Yes! May all who open their hearts savour you and bless the earth!

(... I know of your mercy, Blessed One, and of your unconditional Love; you have been with me from the beginning. Forgive the many times I have walked away from you choosing to follow my own will.

I seek your guidance once again, I yearn to know your peace. Companion me, as I open to your will.)

You are gracious and just, O Spirit of Truth, And happy to guide those who miss their way....

Amen