



27th September 2020
The 16th Sunday After Trinity
Sermon – St James's Piccadilly
The Revd Dr Mariama Ifode-Blease

'It may be rude to point, but not when we are pointing to Christ'

*May I speak in the name of the Triune God,
Father, Son and Holy Spirit.*

On the 18 September 2020, the Notorious RBG, US Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg, died of cancer at the age of 87. One journalist described her as “the demure firebrand” and a “legal, cultural and feminist icon”¹. Her authority, granted to her by the highest court of her land, came much later in a professional life that had been marked by the fight for gender equality and against sex discrimination. Much like our own Brenda Marjorie Hale, Lady Hale of Richmond, (DBE) who became the first female Justice of the UK Supreme Court in 1999, Ruth Bader Ginsburg stepped into a space which had previously been demarcated as not for her. On being questioned about her legacy Justice Bader Ginsburg stated rather humbly: “[I would like to be remembered as] someone who used whatever talent she had to do her work to the very best of her ability. And to help repair tears in her society, to make things a little better through the use of whatever ability she has”².

In her words, as in the readings we have heard today, personal responsibility, authority and public witness collide. For these two women whose careers and personal integrity have inspired so many, there is the sense that a public life of

service has to mean more, give more, leave more than professional achievement and accolades. A day after ordination, and preaching my first sermon here today as a deacon in the Church of England, I confess I feel the weight of my calling and its public nature, but I also know and believe in the promise of the journey ahead.

This is probably a good time to confess that, following a successful school career between the ages of 11-16, I was promptly expelled from the local catholic girls' school aged 17, at the beginning of my A levels. It wasn't because I had broken any school rules, or that I was a rebel with or without a cause. Rather I stood up for myself at a time when I did not agree with the school authorities. After being shouted at and condemned to a life as a nobody, in which I would achieve nothing, I was expelled by the then Head of Sixth Form, with her office door open to the Sixth Form Common Room for maximum humiliation. I shouted back telling her that a) I did not care and b) that I would get to where I was meant to be in life without the help of school. At that point I turned round in floods of tears to see my peers, who had now gathered, giving me a standing ovation in the Common Room. That, as you can imagine, did not go down well with the Head of Sixth Form. So for all you young people out there who have been expelled, told that you are not bright or good

¹ Nina Totenberg, 20 September 2020:

<https://text.npr.org/s.php?sld=100306972>

² <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-us-canada-54218139>

enough, labelled as a misfit or failure because of the colour of your skin, your

gender, sexuality, perceived lack of abilities and talent in the classroom or on the sports field, I want to say this very loudly and very clearly: God's got you; God's got a plan for you; you are held.

Now, at aged 17 I did not feel this at all but, looking back, I can now see God beginning to teach me about personal responsibility, authority and public witness. In today's reading from the Hebrew Bible, Ezekiel 18, we find these same ideas. Ezekiel's words are important because they help to frame the passages we heard today. He writes:

When the wicked turn away from the wickedness they have committed and do what is lawful and right, they shall save their life (Ezekiel 18:27).

This is not necessarily pleasing for us to read. As one commentator points out "Ezekiel's doctrine of responsibility" suggests "that a person is free at any time to turn from wickedness to righteousness and vice versa"³. Our freedom, therefore, comes with great personal responsibility, one we cannot easily shirk as the children of our Creator:

"Searchin' every corner of my mind
Lookin' for the answers I can't find
I have my reasons and life has its lessons
and
I tried to be grateful and count all my
blessings

³ Reginald H. Fuller and Daniel Westberg, *Preaching the Lectionary: The Word of God for the Church Today*. (Collegeville, Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 1984 (Revised Edition), p.184.

But heavy is the head that wears the crown", so Grime Artist Stormzy reminds us.

Jesus bore the weight of the crown of our human responsibility and clothed our fallibility with the piercing light of resurrection morning. And we recognise that we misuse our freedom daily and ignore God's supreme authority, failing to take personal and collective responsibility. Yet we are called to a higher constitution and purpose. Because, as Ezekiel notes, we are called into the daily possibility of transformation.

In today's Gospel reading, the questioning of Jesus' authority has been fuelled by Jesus clearing the Temple of "the money changers and the seats of those who sold doves" (Matthew 21:12) earlier on in the chapter, and what must have been his provocative, grounded yet challenging teaching later on. Jesus looked at the chief priests and elders as only he can look at you, and they buckled. They couldn't answer Him authentically because they knew that they had been seen; Jesus was questioning their role, their presence, their very being.

The alignment in the parable of the first son with the tax collectors and the prostitutes (Matthew 21:28) and the second son with chief priests and elders is like triple jam in a Victoria Sponge: one portion would have been enough, but this portion of allegorical delectability will definitely be remembered by all who were listening.

Did no one tell Jesus that it was rude to point? Jesus' words are pointed and incisive. In the mention of John the Baptist, Jesus points out those who misuse their authority to persecute instead of protect and to

promote falsehood instead of celebrating the truths of the Kingdom of God: justice, equity, the stewardship of creation, the sacredness of our bodies, the freedom of our souls. It is important to remember here that Matthew 21 begins with Jesus' disruptive and captivating entry into Jerusalem.

The chief priests and the elders questioned Jesus's authority because he is consistently stepping into a prophetic space demarcated as not for him. The questioning of Jesus' authority and the Parable of the Two Sons are framed by the passion narrative. The cries of Hosanna at the beginning of the chapter are paralleled by other murmurings and secretive plots at end of the chapter.

In the Letter to the Philippians, the Apostle Paul affirms God as the source of Jesus's authority. The kenosis, the self-emptying of Jesus emphasises this authority imparted by God to Jesus in order that we may understand our fuller purpose:

So that at the name of Jesus
every knee should bend,
in heaven and on earth and under the
earth,
and every tongue should confess
that Jesus Christ is Lord,
to the glory of God the Father
(Philippians 2:10-12).

Philippi, which "stood on the plain of eastern Macedonia", was wealthy with a mixed population of "Macedonians, Greeks and Romans" (Murray 2000: 1179)⁴. The unity of heart and mind, and the regard of the interests of others alluded to by Paul in this passage, underline communal and

interpersonal relations as well as the more private relationship with a God who continues to

watch and wait for the full recognition and manifestation of His Son's life in this earthly realm. The bowing of the knee does not speak to a selfish ego-centric act but to a selfless manifesto of belief in Jesus' authority above the foolishness and tyranny of humankind. There is no coercion here, we are not arrested, beaten and pushed to bend our knee; we are simply asked to recognise the full force of God, of love, made known to us in the human, historic Jesus.

It is hard to hold on to this belief of a world that refers to and is shaped by God's authority, by a deeper understanding of what must go before and what must come after in our limited understanding of time. In the context of the readings today, John the Baptist's life and work came before and pointed to Jesus. In our more modern context, however, we can see that we have established sequences that we present as inevitable when, in fact, that is not the case at all. The notion of democracy, for example, which at its core, seeks to clarify the relationship between power, people, and authority is, in certain countries, preceded by violent repression, murder, and collusion and, in others, rigged elections, a malleability of the law, voter suppression, the slow and steady corrosion of legal and civic processes, followed a perceived democracy. Democracy, like safeguarding, is everyone's responsibility. Our institutions and our lives depend on this irrefutable fact.

In her searing collection of essays, speeches and meditations, *Mouth Full of Blood*, Toni

⁴ Robert Murray, Sr, 'Philippians' in Barton, John and Muddiman John, *The Oxford Biblical Commentary* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), pp.1179-1190.

Morrison writes a brief tribute to Martin Luther King Jr., describing his legacy:

I know the world is better, finer, because he lived in it... He made the act of assuming personal responsibility for alleviating social harm ordinary, habitual and irresistible”⁵.

Assuming personal responsibility liberates us to live fuller and more tethered lives, acknowledging our interdependence and admonishing our selfishness. The vineyard still needs tending, the earth still needs protecting and preserving, communities still need healing, our children still need feeding whether school’s in or out for summer, and those wronged still need justice. And whether you come to this work early or late. You are welcome and you are needed. The irresistibility of action with and within the responsibility that imbues our existence first as humans and, secondly, as Christians has a source in Jesus Christ. Our lives, our bodies even, are called to point to Christ, to recognise the transmission of authority through the resurrection, and to reconstitute that in our words and actions of public witness. It may be rude to point, but not when we are pointing to Christ. We have a mandate to care because we have seen and we know that Jesus goes before us, and that love’s restorative force lies will permeate everything behind and around us.

Amen

⁵ Toni Morrison, *Mouth Full of Blood* (London: Vintage, 2019), p.130.