

Sunday, 15 January 2023
The Second Sunday of Epiphany
1 Corinthians 1.1-9; Gospel of John 1.29-42
The Rev'd Dr Mariama Ifode-Blease
'The truth of what we see'

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

In one broadsheet's list of the '50 best TV shows of 2022', *The Bear* was selected as number one. Having received the gift of a paid subscription to the channel on which it was televised, I gobbled up the show like a vegan apple crumble with vegan vanilla ice-cream on a cold winter's evening. As one critic wrote "The most intense, claustrophobic and spectacular show of the year...*The Bear* is an eight-course, perfectly prepped, cooked, balanced, seasoned and served meal. Delicious. Enjoy".¹ It is an extraordinary show, not only for its characters, superlative acting, but also for its incisive reading of the human condition. It presents us with grief, with the truth and reality of it, and how different people respond and react to it, and how grief can shape our lives.

Perhaps it was because of this realisation that I was struck by the comment someone said to me this week: "The Bear", the person said, "is just like the Church. Everyone is grieving for the loss of something they thought they had or knew". Another revelation in this season of epiphany. In the week in which the Church of England appointed a new diocesan bishop of Blackburn, who does not believe in the ordination of women or in the legitimacy of a woman to preside at the table set by Christ, I am left wondering when the Church will relinquish its grief. The Church is holding on so tightly to bigotry, desperate for a Church made in its own image, and grieving the Church that it believes has been lost to those who choose to be more liberal and inclusive.

And this grief creates and traps an incoherent narrative of 'mutual flourishing', namely that one can be in the Church and say that they do not want a woman priest, and that one is permitted to turn their back, walk out, or worse, if a woman has been called to give and share the bread and wine; and that all this would somehow still be conducive to my flourishing. Breaking News: the truth of what we see is that I cannot flourish if you continue to tell me that I am a second-class citizen. So, the truth of what we see is that being a bigot is a choice, not a theological or Gospel imperative. *It is a choice*. And for those of us that are impatiently waiting for a Church that is made in the image of God, we, too, are grieving. We are grieving this slow walk that ignores questions of justice and equity and, frankly, makes the church a bit of a laughingstock.

¹ <https://www.theguardian.com/tv-and-radio/2022/dec/02/the-50-best-tv-shows-of-2022>

In today's Gospel reading, Jesus came towards John the Baptist. And the truth of what we see is that John chooses revelation and *this truth* over the potential grief of knowing that, in seeing Jesus, his own life was limited:

Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world! This is he of whom I said, "After me comes a man who ranks ahead of me because he was before me" (John 1:29-30).

Echoing Isaiah 53, John, like us, reads into the ancient Hebrew Scripture something new. Though our own lens, our Christology is shaped. We inherit a faith that presents someone who is prepared to take on our burdens, and walk the walk with us until the very end. We are talking about a God, in the person of Jesus, who walks towards us so that we can look up and see, and *say* the truth of what we see, and *say* the truth of what we know, in our deepest being.

The truth of what we see can sometimes be something we wish to ignore. For both us and the planet we call home, things are not looking good. "The data from Copernicus, the EU's climate monitoring service [showed that] 2022 was the fifth warmest year globally... Europe (for a variety of reasons) has the highest rate of temperature increase of any continent in the world".² Yet another revelation this week in the season of epiphany:

And John testified, 'I saw the Spirit descending from heaven like a dove, and it remained on him (John 1:29).

The Holy Spirit, represented as a bird, brings all of creation into the story of life, and death and resurrection, into the call to renewal made manifest at the Eucharist, into the call to honour creation. We were blessed with a baptism last week, for Tiru, and the re-affirmation of baptism vows, for Harry. For me the words heard at Jesus's baptism remain undiluted through the ages, and they still apply. Tiru, Harry, you remain the Beloved of God, with whom God is well pleased. The truth of what we see is that God is interested in *all* of creation, because it is held in the present and in eternity. And, as humans, we cannot claim creation as our own alone. Creation is not ours to destroy.

Epiphaneia, the Greek word from which we have the word 'epiphany', this manifestation or appearance that brings us back to a divine source that is love, is *unmissable* when you see it, and *impossible to ignore* when you feel it. This, I feel, is what John the Baptist realised when he saw Jesus coming towards him. John the Baptist's declaration feels like it is bursting out of him, so much so that others hear it and are intrigued. And as if not content to share the truth of what John sees, he again draws attention to Jesus on a second day:

...and as he watched Jesus walk by, he exclaimed, 'Look, here is the Lamb of God!' The two disciples heard him say this, and they followed Jesus (John 1:36-37).

It is not recorded what Jesus says, or indeed if he says anything at all while his cousin is shouting in the street. Jesus simply walks by. I can only imagine that he smiles knowingly at

² <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/science-environment-64213575>

John and that their eyes lock recognising the truth of what they both see: that the world will hear of the promise of better. Some will listen and walk towards it; some will carry on as if they didn't hear anything at all; some will try to crush it with every fibre of their being.

It was also revealed this week that international superstar singer, Shakira, realised a video that addressed the separation from her husband, who did not forsake all others for Shakira, his then wife. The video entitled, "*Out of your League...* has been watched more than 63 million times in 24 hours, making it the most-watched Latin song in that time period".³ It apparently broke YouTube.

Now for those of us who have been deeply hurt, ill-treated, or betrayed, or have experienced family discord and do not want or have the opportunity to share it on a best seller list or on a global video platform, I want to say again that the truth of what we see is that our private and deepest wounds *can* be recognised by God. And I think that is what happened in the Gospel of John 1: 38:

When Jesus turned and saw them following, he said to them, 'What are you looking for?' They said to him, 'Rabbi' (which translated means Teacher), 'where are you staying?' He said to them, 'Come and see' (John 1:38-39).

Jesus' question is a deep one because Jesus looks right through them. And Jesus gets them immediately. We kind of get it and we kind of don't. I mean, just how close was Andrew following Jesus that he made Jesus turn around. Did he tread on his hem, say? Or was he trying to keep a safe surveillance distance and failing woefully? Whatever it was, Jesus saw Andrew and the other disciple. And then, of course, he saw Peter:

He brought Simon to Jesus, who looked at him and said, 'You are Simon son of John. You are to be called Cephas' (which is translated Peter) (John 1:42).

Jesus looked at Simon. Jesus *looks* at Simon and the truth what he sees is not only his past, but his present and future too. He is Simon, son of John. He *will be* called Cephas. The truth of what we see is that God's gaze on us is not limited to what we are, but it encompasses what we are also called to be. So do not follow Jesus if you do not want Jesus to look at you. Because Jesus will really look at you.

The truth of what we see is that this week, it came to light that Kenyan LGBTQ activist Edwin Chiloba was smothered to death.⁴ Chiloba's body was found over a week ago in a metal box, dumped on the roadside near the western Kenyan town of Eldoret, where he was a university student. This follows the murder in April last year of 25-year-old Sheila Lumumba, who was a lesbian. This is not ok. As a black cis gender woman of African heritage and as a priest, I want to say loud and clear: this is not ok. It is fundamentally wrong to dismiss, isolate, harass, bully, kill members of the LGBTQ community. It is not ok to be silent about it. And if you are priest anywhere in the world *not saying this*, then tell me what it is you are doing when God is looking at you. It is not ok to say that God has a preferential opinion for

³ <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/entertainment-arts-64267366>

⁴ <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-64229077>

men and binary identity, and then bring the whole machinery of institution to uphold and perpetuate this lie. This, too, is fundamentally wrong.

The truth of what we see is that while we wait for a better and more equitable world, now is the time to, like John the Baptist, present the truth of what we see. God is coming towards us, constantly waiting to see how we will respond. God is looking at us, at each one of us, consistently, eager to know if we will accept the gaze of a loving creator. God is naming us individually, not distracted by institutions that seem to be more focused on power than love, on cliques and opaque old boys' networks and clubs than inclusivity, on espousing the idea of flourishing when it means nothing of the sort. God is *naming us*, knowing who we are and what we've done, and who has hurt us, and who has let us down, who has abused us and who has abandoned us, who has rejected us, and who has crushed our hearts. The truth of what we see is that God is *naming us*, God knows what love can do to and for us, and what that courage, because of love, can do, through us, for the world.

Amen.