

Sunday, 18 June 2023  
The Second Sunday after Trinity  
Romans 5.1-8; Psalm 116; and The Gospel of Matthew 9.35-10.8  
The Rev'd Dr Mariama Ifode-Blease

**'You got to let me know, God: Should I stay, or should I go?'**

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

**Amen.**

17, June, Amsterdam; 21, June Hamburg; 24, June Frankfurt. No, I am not talking about our rector's, Lucy Winkett's, preaching tour, but rather the sites where tickets (albeit a few) were still available for Beyoncé's world tour. I could have skipped my church and other work duties. Surely, everyone would understand. I *could actually go and see* Beyoncé and possibly contribute to a rise in inflation in these locations too. Elijah, our deacon, would have helped with my costume, and my giddy sense of reckless abandon and dereliction of duty, which I had imbibed from our previous Prime Minister, would carry me through. I should have prayed about it really:

'You got to let me know, God: Should I stay, or should I go?'

"They just watched", said Ayad. "They could have saved so many more".<sup>1</sup> These are the words of one of the few survivors of the boat that sank "late Wednesday night, 45 miles southwest of Greece's southern Peloponnese peninsula". It has been reported that 100 children were in the hold and possibly 750 people were on the boat, with the boat's passengers "from Syria, Egypt and Pakistan".<sup>2</sup> It is extraordinary to me that we keep vilifying those fleeing with only the clothes on their back, many of whom have paid inordinate amounts of money, for a taste of freedom from one or many kinds of oppression. These individuals and families have had to make decisions, I pray, we never have to make.

'You got to let me know, God: Should I stay, or should I go?'

Who did what and when, who said what and when, seemed to dominate our headlines this week. In between the 'Partygate' report published by the Commons Privileges Committee, (with privilege being the key word here), this unspeakable horror of yet another boat filled with migrants capsized, and the tragedy of three people, including two university students stabbed and killed in Nottingham, I struggled to hold on to the hope of which Paul's letter to the Romans speaks. May the souls of all the departed rest in peace, and rise in glory.

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<sup>1</sup> *The Sunday Times*, 'I survived Greek shipwreck. Drowning children tried to cling to me.' Sunday 18 June 2023, Front page.

<sup>2</sup> The Guardian, 'Greece shipwreck: hopes of finding survivors fade on final day of search', Friday, 16 June 2023: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/jun/16/greece-shipwreck-people-smuggling-suspects-arrested-as-search-continues>.

Hope, like leadership, often comes at price. But it would be dangerous to say that suffering is or has to be the precursor of hope. The question of human suffering cannot be answered in one sermon or indeed several, but it is clear that the Gospel calls us to alleviate suffering and to ensure that we do our part in the work of making the world less a place of pain and more a place of hope. We see Jesus going all over the place, curing the sick, lifting people out of their circumstances and bringing them into new life. As New Testament Scholar Greg Carey writes:

Healing and liberation certify the presence of the realm of heaven. Both Jesus' own mission and that of the Twelve bring not only proclamation but also healing. Jesus sends forth the Twelve to perform his own works, the very works that have defined his ministry from the beginning (4:23-25)... Jesus gives the Twelve clear instructions, then sends them forth to do his works and proclaim his message. Once sent, however, they are on their own. They must assess the responses of the cities; they determine whether to stay or to move along. Instructions only take us so far. The faithful church must move beyond Jesus himself, as the disciples do.<sup>3</sup>

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We, we, have to decide who to help, who to serve, where and how to give, and what our contribution will be. How do we bring healing and liberation to our own lives, to our places of work, to our relationships, to our activism? How do we bring healing and liberation to our imagination, to our bodies and to our minds? We are asked to keep our eyes and hearts open for encounters that bring about these possibilities, because there is clearly so much work that needs to be done. There is so much of life and our society that feels broken right now, and so much of it that is waiting for our hands and feet to help change the narrative. We are reminded that the "harvest is plentiful, but the labourers are few". It is not that creation has run out of beauty or potential or joy or hope, but that we need to step into the story and with the permission that love gives us to bring something better out of the world we see and for the world we seek.

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We read in Matthew 10:1:

Then Jesus summoned his twelve disciples and gave them authority over unclean spirits, to cast them out, and to cure every disease and every sickness.

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<sup>3</sup> Greg Carey, 'Commentary on Matthew 9:35–10:8 [9-23]': <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/ordinary-11/commentary-on-matthew-935-108-9-23>.

We have clear instructions, but I don't know about you, I get a bit squeamish at the sight of blood and would probably be a rather unhelpful medical professional. I have no power to stop people physically dying or to somehow cure their ills. Yet as Carey reminds us "The point is simple: our search for instructions often detracts from the main thing. Where the realm of heaven is breaking out, we find healing and liberation. This is what we need to know".<sup>4</sup> The point of this Gospel is to hold a mirror up to us: if we believe in the suffering, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, if we believe that we are called to follow the example he set in his living and in his dying, what the heavens are we doing about it? Because we are asked to make clear that the Bible isn't always about instruction without interpretation, but about interpretation with a purpose that points to healing and liberation. Are we being asked to stay and look around and see the work that needs to be done, or get up and leave, and still look around, and see the other work that also needs to be done, perhaps a bit farther from our place of comfort?

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The Gospel talks of demons, or in our translation, "unclean spirits". We know historically that this kind of language has been used for women and those suffering from illnesses people could not yet understand. We recognise that the language can be unhelpful, limiting, dangerous even. I return to the scholar Carey who suggests that:

We should think more deeply. Even those of us who cannot get our imaginations around real demons tormenting poor individuals can relate to what it means to be bound by a power one feels powerless to resist. Such demons need not be found only in "those" people, but they reside whenever evil has us firmly in its grip. Many (all?) people find themselves bound by behaviours, patterns, or structures they cannot escape, often cursing themselves when they repeat the same behaviour time and again. When we imagine the realm of exorcism, let us imagine liberation, freedom from powers that constrain us and prevent us from living full human lives.<sup>5</sup>

'You got to let me know, God: How should I stay, or how should I go?

At the risk of you thinking I spend *all* my time watching TV on the sofa with a delightful bowl of crisps in one hand, and sweet popcorn in the other, I will share that some time ago, I sat and watched 'Borgen'. It was a brilliant political drama that filled the 'West Wing'-shaped hole in my life, and gave much to reflect on in terms of leadership, women in public life, and our relationship with the institutions

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<sup>4</sup> Greg Carey, 'Commentary on Matthew 9:35–10:8 [9-23]': <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/ordinary-11/commentary-on-matthew-935-108-9-23>.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

of state. In a review of the last instalment released last year, the journalist commented on the almost decade-long gap since Borgen was last on our screens:

Reflecting the times must have also been a huge consideration. In the nine years [2013 -2022] the show has been away, we've had Brexit, Trump, the Black Lives Matter movement, #MeToo, a global pandemic, and the Russian invasion of Ukraine.<sup>6</sup>

What a difference nine years makes. Here, in today's Gospel reading, we can find a start to how we make sense of our place in all of this. All these historical events and movements have had an impact, to a lesser or greater degree, on our lives. Through them, we have been forced to ask questions of all those in positions of power to make things better; we have had to ask questions of ourselves, and of each other.

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We heard in Psalm 116 today: "O God, I am your servant, the child of your servant: you have freed me from my bonds". Only we know what we have been freed from, because we have all been freed from something. And only we know what that freedom has allowed us to do, allowed us to *be*. When we think about the healing and liberation of which we have been asked to be a part, and in this season of Pentecost, we can find comfort in the fact that God does not expect us to do this alone. We are in this together for the sake of our bodies and minds, for the sake of Christ's body alive in the church, for the sake of our beautiful world, and desperate migrants, and helpless children. God is asking something of us, as Jesus asked of the Twelve. And we, too, are asking God what our part in bringing healing and liberation really means and looks like.

'So, you got to let me know, God: Should I stay, or should I go?

**Amen.**

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<sup>6</sup> Matt Charlton, 'Borgen again! The most prescient show on TV is back - and still working its magic', The Guardian, Monday, 30 May 2022: <https://www.theguardian.com/tv-and-radio/2022/may/30/borgen-again-the-most-prescient-show-on-tv-is-back-and-still-working-its-magic>.