

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

It's a real privilege to be preaching at the Parish Eucharist on this first Sunday in September. After our community dispersed for various holidays, day trips, school breaks, festivals, Lighthouse, Greenbelt and so on, September always feels like the time when we reconvene, when the cogs start moving again, and we enter into a new season, refreshed and raring to go (well, that's the theory, anyway...!)

And, our readings this morning offer some great teaching as we start this new season.

I love the excerpt of the epistle to the Hebrews which we heard this morning, with it's opening sentence "let mutual love continue". What better sentiment as we gather back together as a church community after the Summer?

The reading continues with a list of things we need to be sure to do – show hospitality to strangers, remember the imprisoned and tortured, keep our lives free from the love of money, place our complete trust in God, and so on – hopefully all values to which we aspire.

Then, in our gospel reading, Jesus brings things into sharper focus with a parable about not taking the place of honour when invited to a banquet, to save embarrassment if somebody more important turns up – pretty sound social advice, it's probably fair to say.

He goes on to tell the Pharisees that when they give a dinner, they should not invite their relatives, friends, rich neighbours and so on – people who would undoubtedly return the favour – No - instead they are to invite strangers, the most vulnerable in society, and thereby give freely. Again, sound moral instruction.

But what links all this together? And in what ways do we need to give some of this stuff a bit more thought than it might appear on the surface?

I think what we're talking about here is humility, grace, and acts of mercy. But we need to be a bit careful. I want to talk about HOW we do this stuff.

Humility is a wonderful attribute, but it needs to be natural, unforced, and easy.

False humility can be a dangerous thing. We need to be careful how we respond to the lessons we've heard this morning. We can so easily appear overly pious and patronising. We need to be aware of the context from which we act and speak and to check our privilege.

Sometimes the language we're faced with is unhelpful in itself. "The poor, the lame, the crippled, the blind"... Yes, we must prioritise the needs of the most vulnerable. But we lose the plot once we start to think of people as a different category! They are no different to us. We are all people, all human beings.

We also need to consider *how* we help people. Perhaps you saw MP David Lammy's tweet to comic relief last year, which made headlines. In it, he argued that the world 'does not need any more white saviours', and claimed that "the idea that Africans are victims that need saving is a missionary idea... Let's instead promote voices from Africa and have a serious debate"

I think this is the stuff that Jesus is warning against at the end of today's gospel reading - the temptation to extend invitations to people or to do charitable works to be seen to be doing good, or without truly listening to the need in the first place. We need to be careful of our own egos.

You might remember last Christmas when a load of MPs visited food banks to have their pictures taken for the press. How nauseating was that!? Then assumption was that they simply wanted to be seen nominally being associated with something charitable in order to raise their own profiles and push themselves forward.

No, says Jesus. No return invitations. No pushing yourself forward. No being seen to be doing things. Invite those who are the most vulnerable and needy so that the dinner may be freely given and not repaid.

Natural humility and acts of grace, mercy and love are the things to hold on to here.

If we try to force being humble in order to be favoured by God, the what we are actually saying is that we don't need God's grace, mercy and love – and we're also implying that there are others who don't deserve these things and shouldn't have them. That simply doesn't work.

There was a great little montage of images on Facebook the other day which listed 'The Works of Mercy', many of which reinforce the things we heard in our Hebrews reading.

Again – not the most helpful language in terms of categorising people – but they were:

- Feed the hungry**
- Give water to the thirsty**
- Clothe the naked**
- Shelter the homeless**
- Visit the sick**
- Visit the imprisoned**
- Bury the dead**

All good things which Christians are called to do, but there's a problem, which someone on Facebook had been quick to point out:

The person said

'alternatively your leaders could speak out against the policies that cause these inequalities'.

Now, I don't agree with the word alternatively. But replace that word with *also*, and I'd say this person was spot on.

To simply address the needs of those in our society and the wider world who are vulnerable without asking *why* they are vulnerable in the first place isn't good enough – we need to use our position of privilege to speak out and challenge the systems and structures which have caused this vulnerability in the first place.

You may remember a video clip which went viral after the mass shooting in a California bar last November. It showed a distraught woman called Susan Schmidt-Orfanos, whose Son, 27 year old Telemachus Orfanos, had been killed in the atrocity.

She pleaded: "I don't want prayers, I don't want thoughts, I want gun control and I hope to God nobody else sends me more prayers"

Well, of course we need to pray, and we should pray. Prayer is the foundation on which our faith rests. Prayer can transform people, situations, places.

But God created us with freewill, intelligence, ability, skills. We can't just sit around praying and waiting for God to do something. We have the ability to act and make practical changes for the good in our society, in our own lives, and in the world around us.

And in order to be taken seriously as Christians, we must do both.

We need to be people who respond to need as well as challenge WHY it is there in the first place, and this is perhaps more important than ever given the current political and social climate in which we find ourselves.

The person on Facebook who said 'alternatively you could speak out' and the mother who said 'I don't want prayers' were arguably throwing the baby out with the bathwater – but it's easy to see why they've reached these conclusions. All too often the Church, it's leaders, and those of us who identify as Christians can appear to be all bark and no bite.

We must be a people of action who demonstrate that we are making a practical difference in order that we may also show the world the benefit of our works of mercy or the prayers that we offer.

We need be a people of ACTION AND ACTIVISM It's always a both, and.

We also need to be honest with ourselves, and others, about where we fall short. We aren't perfect - and that's ok - but we need to have a degree of honesty and self awareness if we are to try to do better.

How many times have we pushed ourselves forward in a way Jesus warns against in our gospel? Realised there are no assigned seats and so thought, 'ok then, I'm going to grab a place near the important people!' I know I've been guilty of this on many an occasion.

Do we sometimes find ourselves not wanting to talk to the slightly strange person who wanders in? Or longing for that new car, or house, or item of clothing that we don't really need?

Right here in our church, do we sometimes extend a special welcome to some more than others, even offering them better seats on occasion, because they hold 'status' in our society?

And to balance things out, do we ever turn this on its head and show preferential treatment to those with no status, who don't appear to be 'important'? I think we know the answer, and we shouldn't have that kind of hierarchical approach. This should be a place where all are equal, and better seats or special welcome shouldn't be reserved for the powerful and privileged – in fact Jesus is saying quite the opposite – that the least privileged and lacking in status should be favoured.

There was a great Cartoon in the church times a few months ago showing a congregation gathering for worship with the caption which read

'the whole church watched with nervous anticipation as the visitors sat where the Martins have sat for 42 years'

Now I'd like to think not that kind of church, (though please feel free to correct me at the door on the way out!), but I wonder if we fall into the trap of doing this metaphorically? By holding onto offices, jobs, particular areas of responsibility? Do we sometimes hold things too tightly, in a way which excludes others in partaking?

Are there people who would like to be involved in our welcoming, pastoral teams, prayer ministry, choir, music, serving teams, but who we put off by holding ownership of them too close to our chests? I suspect we do and that it's something we all need to look at.

I don't want to sound sanctimonious. I for one fall into these traps all the time, and generally these issues arise because of our neediness.

Scrambling for or being defensive of a particular position, or pushing oneself forward comes from a place of neediness, whereas people who are comfortable in their own skin and their relationship with God don't tend to seek the approval of others or scramble for the seat or position of importance.

I wonder what the church would be like if no one felt the need to be first, or to grab power, or to seek attention?

We all have to be reminded of this stuff, and we're all challenged by it - but that's the point - and it's ok.

I love the line in the first hymn which went 'Now assembled in Christ's name – all your mercies to proclaim'. I feel like its summarises our gathering this morning perfectly.

So, as we reconvene as a church community, as things start to wind up, as we start new schools, universities, or jobs, settle into new homes, or maybe just ease into the new season, may we be a people of both action and activism, may mutual love continue, and may we keep proclaiming those mercies.

Amen.

8 am ending

So as we enter into a new season together, may we be a people of both action and activism, may mutual love continue, and may we keep proclaiming God's mercies.

Amen

