

Sunday 14th July 2019 – Fourth after Trinity

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts be acceptable to you, O Lord, our strength and our redeemer. **Amen.**

There's an old Tibetan proverb which goes like this:

I was walking in the mountains and saw a shadow in the trees ahead of me. I thought it must be an animal and I was afraid, then drawing closer I saw that it was a human figure; when I drew even closer still, I realised that it was my brother.

Recognising his brother is precisely what the Good Samaritan does. Here is a man, caught off guard, who crosses social, cultural and religious boundaries to help his brother whom he sees in need. Whilst the priest and Levite walk past, he recognises the man's humanity which transcends the limitations society imposes on him and responds to the call of the human voice, no different to his own. There is no judgement passed on the man – we are not told if he's a publican or a lawyer, a priest or a robber, because none of that matters – our neighbour is whoever crosses our path.

Luke tells us two things the Samaritan does: the first is that he has pity on the man, or we might better say, 'has compassion' because it more accurately represents the Samaritan suffering with the man. Secondly, the Samaritan draws closer to the man, he comes alongside him and accompanies him to the safety of the inn. These actions tell us something of what it means to love our

neighbour. Hold that thought, because in a minute we'll see two more actions which are in contrast to these.

No story in the Bible better explains some my new role as a deacon. As you may know, all Church of England clergy spend a year as a deacon before they are ordained priest. In the months leading up to my ordination, many people asked me what a deacon does and how their role is different from a priest. Without getting into all the sacramental differences in this, I would simply use the words which Bishop Andrew read to us during the ordination service:

Deacons are to work with their fellow members in searching out the poor and weak, the sick and lonely and those who are oppressed and powerless, reaching into the forgotten corners of the world, that the love of God may be made visible.

That's what I'm called to do, or better, to be. But that's not enough! Doing good is important, but the risk is that our busyness, causes us to lose sight of the person or people we're trying to help. Next week we'll hear the story of Mary and Martha in which, as you know, Jesus rebukes Marta for rushing around with the housework while Mary sits listening to him. Our next two actions: sit and listen. But listening is not just listening to the word of God preached on a Sunday morning, nor is it simply listening for the voice of God in prayer, important as these two are. Rather, listening is about hearing the voice of Christ coming to us from other people. Along with

serving the poor the sick and the oppressed, listening will be a large part of my ministry.

Listening enables us to know and understand people better and often, unless we listen before we act, we may assume we know what's required in a situation when we've got very little idea.

One day a bishop came across a lady sitting begging. He bought her a coffee and took it to her and as she took it from him, she said, 'I'd have preferred a cup of tea'. The Bishop was not amused, (he had just spent a fair amount on an oat milk salted caramel latte for the woman): the old adage, 'beggars can't be choosers' was no doubt running through his mind. But then he realised that in choosing the coffee for the woman, he'd denied her a part of her humanity in having the right to make a choice. Instead of helping her, as he'd intended, he ended up humiliating her.

Sitting and listening prevents us from acting to satisfy a need within us rather than in the one we think we're helping. Like Martha, we can easily think that what we're doing is right – after all, who knows what's needed better than us?!

St. Benedict, writing in the 6th century, began his monastic rule with the word, 'listen', to underline the importance of being attentive to God's voice in our daily life. Work in God's kingdom begins with listening, not with our plans but with God's.

What God asks of me, He asks of you too. God calls us to work just as we are, here and now. It doesn't matter if we feel ready or capable, if we're old or young, rich or poor: I've learnt that there will never be a perfect moment to get stuck in with this. Our first task is to trust that God will give us what's needed – the Samaritan used the resources he had, he wasn't planning on administering first aid that morning.

God is not looking for servants but friends, not people who do things for him, but people who let *him* do things in *them*, people who are willing to be the instruments in his toolbox, simply objects until they are picked up and put to use; willing to be the pencil in the hand of an artist hand poised over a blank canvass.

I have to admit that I have never had a moment of hearing God's voice booming out to me from the heavens – some people have and testify to hearing God call out to them in the silence of prayer. I have, however, heard the voice of God speak to me through other people, just as I have seen the face of Christ in my neighbour, the people who at a distance frightened me, but from close up are my brothers and sisters.

It takes courage to cross the road, courage to face that scary unknown shadow seen from afar, courage to listen to and then follow what God is asking us to do, even if that means setting aside our own desires. God doesn't ask us to be strong, he knows our strengths and

weaknesses, but he does ask us to do the same as the Good Samaritan and Mary, balancing doing with listening.

I confess, as I begin my ministry among you, to feeling daunted at the prospect of all this. I'll get the balance of doing and listening wrong, please correct me as we journey together here.

As so often is the case, the saints, who are our forebears in faith, say it better than we can. This is how Mother Teresa of Calcutta put it; it's her prayer, but it's also mine and I hope yours:

*Lord when I am hungry,
give me someone in need of food;
when I am thirsty,
send me someone needing a drink;
when I am cold,
send me someone to warm;
when I am grieved,
offer me someone to console
when my cross grows heavy,
let me share another's cross;
when I think only of myself.
draw my thoughts to another. **Amen.***