

Address by David James, 23 October 2022 at St David's Church

Goodies and baddies - they're the basis of many a plot, from the standard Western film to the high drama of *Hamlet* or a successful tv series like *Broadchurch* or *Line of Duty*.

We, of course, are always for the goodies, essentially because that's the group we identify with most. 'I thank you Lord that I am not like other people - especially not like that unpleasant guy over there. I'm a decent chap, I go to church, I support charity, I help other people.' Beguiling, isn't it? And we all get caught out like the Pharisee in the story we've just heard from St Luke's Gospel.

He was a decent man, he was obviously doing good things, but he was complacent and his complacency hid the way in which he separated himself from others in his own mind and which was revealed by his attitude to the tax collector as they prayed together, yet a million miles apart. We can see it, but he couldn't.

The other day, talking to Laura Kuensberg of the BBC, Nicola Sturgeon said 'I despise the Tories'. Even though after the last few weeks in politics we might want to concede she may have a point, we want nonetheless to distance ourselves from such a mischievous and derogatory remark, whilst inwardly chuckling. I once came across a comment made by some waspish American society hostess who said 'If you haven't got anything nice to say about anyone, come and sit by me.' There's maybe a bit of that too in us - well, I must speak for myself!

But it's the attitude which separates us from others that strikes me as the important thing to notice in this parable. Because the passage stops where it does, we miss out on what happened next, which was the moment when people brought children to be touched by Jesus. What do the disciples who've just been listening to Jesus's parable do? They shoo them away - sternly. You can imagine Jesus despairing and saying 'You don't get it, do you? Let them come to me - these children are closer to the kingdom than you are: they are more trusting, more ready to accept others and are freer of your adult prejudices. Don't create barriers.'

Separation is the bane of our lives. There's us and there's them. Social media, a powerful modern influence, plays into that attitude and encourages hermetically sealed interest groups whilst elsewhere internet algorithms send material based on *your* interests to the exclusion of all else.

Modern wokery is a particularly unpleasant example of it. The protesters think and act on the assumption that they are the righteous ones; they are not like us. From cancelling speakers at universities to protesters blocking our roads woke attitudes reveal narrow minds.

I guess most of us here are very aware, for example, of the damage humans are doing to the environment by using oil or gas to heat their homes or to drive their cars. Our recent 'Green Event' was all about that. Yet for Stop Oil protesters they are the virtuous, the others are the baddies. This narrow focus is what justifies their blocking roads and preventing others working, children going to school or people heading for hospital appointments they've waited months for. Green virtue trumps community responsibility.

I read a wry comment the other day from a professor who wrote wondering what kind of glue it was the protesters were using since 80% of all glues derive from fossil fuel products. Life is always more complicated than we think or would like to believe.

But it remains true of course that we have indeed damaged the environment as human beings. We have looked on the rest of creation as something to be exploited so that our societies and economies can grow wealthier. We have privileged our economic growth over responsibility for the creation and the effects of our exploitation on other people elsewhere. And our tradition is not guiltless in that attitude either, because we read on the very first page of Genesis:

Be fruitful and multiply, fill the earth and subdue it... and have dominion over ... every living thing that moves upon the earth.
(Genesis 1.28)

Only in very recent times have we begun to realise our impact on the world of plants and animals because we have regarded them as somehow separate from us. So I read only the other day that research seems to show that in the last fifty years in this country alone 41% of species have declined (some like turtle doves by 93%) whilst 15% have become extinct.

So this parable warns us of very real dangers, not just to our spiritual health but also to the health of the creation in which we live, both human and natural. Because - surprise - they are linked.

The gospels are good news because in them we see Jesus restoring his creation. He heals people, he brings lepers back into society and restores sight to the blind or strength to the cripple or hearing to the deaf so they can become part of their community again and no longer have to beg for support. He teaches people to understand how we all belong together. We are all sinners in fact because what sin does always and everywhere is separate us from those around us and the community in which we live as well as from the natural world on which we depend for life.

Jesus is the one who bridges the separation. He is the High Priest of the Hebrew letter, the Pontifex Maximus in Latin, pontifex meaning literally 'bridge-builder'. That is why we are called to be a priestly people, bridge-builders, creating connections and overcoming the gulfs that separate us from each other.

And of course this does happen. It's not all doom and gloom; there is so much good that goes on in bringing people and communities and nations together. We just don't hear about it often on the news. Just think for a moment of the tens of thousands who queued to pay their respects to the late Queen, people who helped one another, shared food, assisted when someone was ill, just talked and shared a few moments of their life connecting with whoever was next to them in the queue - even if it wasn't David Beckham!

The Eucharist is the place above all where we are reminded of this. It is all about communion - our communion with God and our communion with one another. The Eucharist reminds us we're all baddies actually, so we all need the goodness and the forgiveness of God in Jesus Christ to bring us back together. So we begin the liturgy by asking for forgiveness - the old Prayer Book liturgy made it even clearer by placing the prayers of penitence right before we come to communion -

Ye that do truly and earnestly repent of your sins and are in love and charity with your neighbours, and intend to lead a new life following the commandments of God, and walking from henceforth in his holy ways; draw near with faith and take this holy sacrament to your comfort and make your humble confession to almighty God, meekly kneeling upon your knees.

'He beat his breast, saying, God, be merciful to me, a sinner.'

We are baddies who are also potentially goodies by the grace of God who forgives us. Forgiving re-establishes our relationship with God and each other. That's the good news; and we share it every time we forgive or create new relationships.

As the writer E M Forster once famously said, 'Only connect.'