

Address for 8 August 2021 by David James

‘Be kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you.’

A couple of Sundays ago Ash was leading a Thrive session about the letter of James (an excellent introduction to it, by the way, still available through our Facebook page), and one of the questions he asked us to think about was how do we show other people that we are Christians. What evidence is there we could point to?

The sentence I’ve just quoted from the Ephesian letter we’ve heard this morning gives, I think, the heart of the answer to Ash’s question. And as though to hammer the point home it’s there too embedded in the prayer Jesus gave us to say every time we come before God: ‘Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us.’

This, then, is the crucial demonstration of our Christian faith - ‘Be kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you.’ ‘Forgive them, Father, for they don’t know what they’re doing’, says Jesus even as the soldiers pierce his body with nails to fix him to his cross. ‘I have come not to condemn the world but to save it’, we hear him saying in John’s Gospel and it is a marker of all Christian martyrs - they’re witnesses (which is what the word means) to faith because they die with forgiveness not hatred in their hearts, like Stephen, the very first of them. Open to the Spirit, they are given grace to let go of human animosity and offer themselves wholly to God.

The other day there was a picture on the front page of the paper of a young woman called Em Sheldon. I’d never heard of her, but evidently she’s well-known in the world of Instagram influencers. And she was there on the front page because she had received so much online abuse through the medium that she decided to speak out about it.

‘People hate influencers’, she said, ‘They are so angry at us making money. It could be something crazy like me just walking my dog. People are just so angry.’

‘We fight like hell’, said another influencer, ‘And if you don’t

fight like hell, you're not going to have a country any more.' That was Donald Trump speaking to a crowd just hours before they invaded Congress to try and prevent President Biden being sworn in.

There's a great deal of anger in the world; the question is where does it come from. What provokes it? The photo of Em Sheldon appeared on July 14th - in France that's Bastille Day, the occasion when the infamous Paris prison was stormed in 1789 as a symbol of all that was wrong, oppressive and exploitative about the regime that had ruled the country for generations. Anger provoked by a sense of injustice and a desire to right wrongs is, I think, the kind of anger that the writer to the Ephesians - quite probably Paul - has in mind when he says, 'Be angry but do not sin'. Anger caused by horror of trading in human slaves was certainly what animated the three abolitionist campaigners we remembered just over a week ago - William Wilberforce, Olauda Equiano and Thomas Clarkson.

Yes, this letter is saying, be angry about inhumanity to others, about cruelty, about discrimination, about exploitation of people, about the abuse of power or the devastation of the environment, but take care the anger doesn't come from bad motives - as in the case of Em Sheldon, from people who are simply envious or jealous or spiteful. There is anger that is self-serving and anger that is community-serving and it's important to know the difference. Anger which is channelled towards a positive outcome is useful and works to the common good.

The difficult anger most of us experience, though, usually comes from personal hurts; and the remedy for that, says the Ephesian letter is to forgive. Forgiveness is about letting go the desire to hurt someone back, to damage them as they have wounded us.

The word the NT uses for forgiving is a word that's linked with the idea of letting go. To forgive someone for what they've done lets them go. It frees us too - from the need for revenge, or pay-back. And it's seldom a one-off business. Forgiveness

can take a long time if the hurt is very deep, and it's part of a whole process whereby we become enabled to let the one who has hurt us go. We then find that we too have then been freed to move on, to leave resentment behind and to make something positive of the anger that is at the root of it.

This isn't easy, which is why, when it happens, it is such a powerful witness. So how do we reach that kind of attitude of heart and mind - or at least try to?

The way to become at the least a more forgiving person is shown us by what we hear in today's gospel reading from St John. This is part of a long speech by Jesus which includes one of the important 'I am' sayings: 'I am the bread of life' (6.48). St John doesn't give an account of the Last Supper in his gospel, but far from that meaning he doesn't think it's important, what he gives us instead is a profound meditation on the deep significance of the Eucharist for Christians.

From this we learn that to share in the Eucharist, to eat the physical bread and drink the actual wine is to open ourselves up to the work of the Holy Spirit who is sent by Jesus. If we are to become more forgiving like him we need to become more open to him and allow him to become literally and spiritually part of us.

This is why, in answer to Ash's question 'how do we show we are a Christian?', Nigel, our Vicar, said, 'By coming to worship.' And he might have added, 'Especially the Eucharist.' This sacrament offers us real food and real drink to help us cope with real life. 'We become what we worship', Bishop Robert once said, 'because we worship what we love.' We will only become more like Jesus by placing him at the centre of our worship. And nowhere is he more central or more present than in the Eucharist in which the gift of his sacrificial love is offered by him to be shared with us.

A lovely Benedictine nun, commenting on the importance of worship in Benedict's Rule says, 'Prayer has to bring beauty, substance, and structure to our otherwise chaotic and superficial lives or it is not long before life itself becomes

chaotic and superficial.' Of all prayer the Eucharist brings us closest to Christ because it renews our communion with him and all that he is, as well as with each other.

As a result of a chance remark at the men's breakfast recently I let slip that Ruth and I were about to celebrate our Golden Wedding anniversary. The consequence of that is that you all now know we celebrated it last weekend. At the heart of that celebration, as for most celebrations in life, was a meal. To sit and eat and drink together as a family was the best thing we could think of to do. It is a profoundly human way of drawing us together, both marking and cementing relationships. A shared meal not only symbolises community it creates it. Like most families ours is a very disparate group of people, all at different stages in their lives, but here around the table we were drawn together by love and became one.

A shared meal is not just a sign of our belonging together it becomes the reality. The Eucharist works just like that. The outward and visible signs of bread and wine shared together become the reality of our communion with Christ and each other. This is how we become Christ-like; this is how we learn to forgive and live like him.