

Christ Church, Bath

Holy Eucharist

Sunday 26 July 2020, 10am

Trinity 7

Proper 12

I Kings 3.5-12

Romans 8.26-39

St Matthew 13.31-33, 44-52

“The Spirit helps us in our weakness” writes St Paul, “for we do not know how to pray as we ought.” Hadn’t the disciples once asked Jesus “Teach us to pray?” One reason I don’t pray aright is because I don’t always know what I should be praying for, or even about. Perhaps I don’t want to know. If I pray for such-and-such, will I then have to do something about it?

Solomon’s prayer is often cited as an example of how wise he was, that he’d got his values right. But he’s actually praying for the gift of wisdom and an understanding mind. He’s with St Paul on this one.

Last week Lore touched on the pain we’re all experiencing because of Covid-19. It’s not just that the pandemic is hurting so much. It’s also shone a spotlight on the things we somehow knew were wrong but hadn’t wanted to look at too hard. Let me quote António Guterres, the United Nations Secretary General. In his Mandela 2020 Lecture eight days ago he put it this way: “COVID-19 has been likened to an X-ray, revealing fractures in the fragile skeleton of the so-

cieties we have built. It is exposing fallacies and falsehoods everywhere: The lie that free markets can deliver healthcare for all; The fiction that unpaid care work is not work; The delusion that we live in a post-racist world; The myth that we are all in the same boat.”

For now I want to pick up on just one of his themes: his statement “The delusion that we live in a post-racist world.”

Here in Bath we live with the legacy of slavery. Not of course the same legacy (if we're white Caucasian) as the descendants of those who were enslaved. But a legacy nonetheless, for many of us are at least indirectly beneficiaries. William Wilberforce may have been one of the founders of Christ Church two hundred and twenty years ago, but after watching some of David Olusoga's Black History programmes on the BBC I guess some of the wealth that paid for this building, like quite a lot of the wealth that built Georgian Bath, was slave money.

Today Christ Church is trying to bear witness against these injustices. We want to present to

the world a different and a better narrative such as that which celebrates the arrival of the Empire Windrush. That's our vision.

But why is it that Christian people so often fail to realise our vision? Or realise it only in part?

How did you feel when Edward Colston's statue was toppled in Bristol? Most of us will have been aware of the debate about the statue and whether to keep his name on public buildings. Heaven knows, it had been going on for long enough. Had the crowd not pulled him down last month, I wonder how long we'd have gone on debating, round and round, round and round?

The Pharisees get a pretty bad press in the gospels, I think unfairly. I don't think they were individually any worse than most religiously observant people. You can argue that the Pharisees deserve credit for quite a lot of good things: opening synagogues, copying out the Hebrew scriptures and making them available, for education – where would the Church be if Pharisees hadn't given Saul of Tarsus a first-class grounding in the scriptures?

And while many Pharisees were attracted by Jesus of Nazareth, some of his teaching (like the parables we've listened to this morning) was a step too far.

Let's pause a moment and put ourselves in their shoes as they listened to what Jesus is saying in these parables.

The kingdom of heaven like a net that has within it bad fish that still need to be sorted? Why does Jesus liken the kingdom to yeast, when so much ritual depended on *unleavened* bread? He's even likening the kingdom to a woman, who for all we know might be ritually unclean? Don't women have their own designated court in the temple away from the Holy of Holies; aren't they made to sit apart in the synagogue? Anyway, Jesus can't be a consistent teacher. He once told us not to hide our light under a bushel and now he's telling us to bury our most precious find in a field!

If, like me, you were quite glad that the statue of Edward Colston has now gone, but also felt uneasy at the manner of its toppling, I suggest that we need to stop and think what this means. I can

only speak for myself at this point, but I have a horrible feeling that my hesitant attitude to the street demonstrations organised by the #Black Lives Matter campaign is suspiciously like the Pharisees' reaction to much of Christ's teaching and his actions. And how do we feel about the increasing demands from those descended from those who were enslaved for compensation?

I can't remember who said it, but the other day I read a statement by someone who commented on the urgency with which governments round the world were addressing the Coronavirus crisis, and compared it with the lethargy with which they are addressing the Climate Crisis. The same comparisons could be made with the church's slow response to the iniquities of racism in both our history and our current practice.

It was only as I listened to some of the interviews with those who pulled Edward Colston's statue down that I started to appreciate how urgent it is that we face up to what's needed. Things need to change not tomorrow but now, today, because too many of God's people are still hurting.

Can we see God's Holy Spirit blowing through these debates? Is God's Holy Spirit blowing winds of change, and blowing them in our direction? Or to switch metaphors, can we see Christ amongst the demonstrators calling on his followers to go the second mile with him, to be bolder, more radical, than perhaps our upbringing and our formation have prepared us for. But if I'm truly honest, I'm still wondering whether I have the appetite for it.

Let's return to our Old Testament story, and try to imagine ourselves standing in Solomon's shoes. I wonder how he might have been feeling at the start of his reign. Until that moment, he'd probably not thought he'd be king; his half-brothers Absalom and Adonijah were older; anyway, look what happened to them. I guess he was pretty apprehensive that night when he went to bed in Gibeon. I'm not surprised that he had what the psychologists call an anxiety dream. But what a blessing that dream turned out to be! Tradition has it that he not only governed wisely but confidently.

Perhaps the way out of our anxieties is for us to pray Solomon's dream, for us to pray his prayer with confidence, and in that prayer to ask for grace to overcome our hesitations and our fears.