

## SERMON FOR THIRD SUNDAY BEFORE LENT - 13.2.22

It is so good to be back with you today. I remember coming when I'd got my Reader's scarf and here I am, a priest. The loving welcome you gave us when I was on placement and the many things I learned from this community have stayed with me. This is a special place.

✕ May I speak in the name of the God of justice - Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

- I want to start with a story. I was 13. It was the end of term in my posh girls' school. There was a gap between tidying our desks and the final assembly. Our form teacher allowed us to play some indoor games while we waited and one of the class leaders suggested The Farmer's in his Den. You'll maybe know this one: everyone stands in a circle and one person is chosen as farmer, who then chooses a wife and so on, until the last person chosen is the farmer's dog. You may know that the farmer pats his dog and all the circle is supposed to join in. When the time came for this, the person chosen was a girl who was not much liked. The patting was not gentle and didn't stop. 23 girls hitting one. I pulled myself out of the circle and signalled to the teacher to intervene. I was unpopular myself and would not have been listened to - but not being part of that baying crowd is one of the times in my life I am most proud of. You also need to know that the girl and I were Jews, and the school had an unwritten quota: no more than three Jews per class of 25. I discovered that much later.
- The beatitudes, as they appear in Luke, are rather different from Matthew's version. They are both more poetic and more stark. Poetic because of the clear rhetorical patterning (three "blesseds" and three "woes"). Stark because the voice for the voiceless - the poor and marginalised - is so clear and uncompromising. Today is racial justice Sunday and we are called to listen to that voice and in our turn to be clear and uncompromising.
- Uncompromisingly clear that in the fairly recent past, the church, even when it was not blatantly rejecting Windrush congregants (which it certainly did), allowed itself to make decisions based on a white, straight, male model. Uncompromisingly clear that these decisions and the assumptions behind them - about suitable culture, education and morality - seeped into every area of church life. Uncompromisingly clear that those leakages not only did untold damage then, but still persist and are often hard to identify until the damage is done - again. Uncompromisingly clear that that is not good enough, and we all, as the Body of Christ, need to seek out and reject such assumptions, and to care for those parts of the Body which are directly harmed, recognising that harm to one part is harm to all.
- To think about this further, I am taking two quotations from recent Church of England materials produced for this Sunday. The first comes from Shermara Fletcher of Churches Together in England. "When you deal with and uproot any attitudes of racism, discrimination, and prejudice in yourself and/or your institution, what does your voice have the power to save and what does your silence have power to enable?" For me this is a reminder of two things: we all have work to do, and we need to be aware of the power of silence as well as speaking out. The church cannot change by itself - every one of us needs to do this work, starting with the voices and silent assumptions in our own heads. And it is not just a simple declaration that is called for, but a discernment of what our talk and our silence can cause.
- Next, Wale Hudson Roberts, of the Baptist Union asks: "How can you cultivate a congregation who by their creative anger are compelled to be a voice with the voiceless?" Again, two things come to mind: first that cultivating a congregation is what we all do, not just the ministers. Is this congregation interested in being a voice with the voiceless? What could we all do to make sure that it is? And secondly the idea of creative anger. For the longest time, the British way was to smother anger and see it as dangerous and immoral. Jesus' example in the Temple should be enough to make us rethink that. Anger is neither good nor bad, only what we do about it. Why not be creative and put the energy it brings to good use?
- So, keeping quiet, simply refraining from deliberate prejudice, are no longer options. Being calm, not allowing our anger at racism to be heard and seen, not being creative with the energy God has given us, are no longer options. As a church, we need to dig deep and stand tall. Dig deep to root out residual racism in ourselves, and stand tall and strong together to call it out elsewhere.
- So, let us pray...  
God our Maker - You call us here to worship You together. To bear witness to Your creativity, seen in all of us. We are all Your children, bearing Your divine image, shaped by Your imagination and breath. Send us out in the power of your Spirit, to stand as living trees beside flowing water and bear fruit. To proclaim the joyous diversity of your good creation, this day and while we have breath.  
**Amen.**