

The Good News ...

... sets us free

A sermon given on the Eleventh Sunday of Trinity, 20th August 2023 – by the Vicar, the Revd Canon Jonathan Baker, in Beverley Minster

Matthew 15:10-20

Well, this week the headlines have been full of news of the case of Lucy Letby, the nurse found guilty of murdering seven babies and attempting to murder several more. It's attracted a lot of attention, not least because Lucy Letby seems to be such an ordinary person - an apparently normal young woman from an ordinary background, with none of the trauma or difficult life experience that often goes with these sorts of cases. And it's been a puzzle: why does an apparently normal and likeable person who has dedicated herself to a career in nursing turn into a cold hearted killer of babies? It's a mystery. And not surprisingly the tabloids have struggled a bit to know how to categorise her. They're used to dealing with either you're an angel and a hero on the one hand, or you're a monster on the other. And they've struggled to pigeonhole her in that kind of way. And in fairness it's not just the tabloids. It's a natural human tendency to want to be able to label people in a simplistic way; to make distinctions between the people we find acceptable and the people we don't; the people we want to associate with and the people we don't; between those who are 'in' and those who are 'out'. And each group, each community, each society, will draw the lines in different places, and in the process we always run the risk of stereotyping people, putting labels on people and pigeonholing them and generalising about them, so that we don't have to think of them as individuals. Because when individuals don't comfortably fit into the categories we set aside for them, we tend to struggle.

And we see something of this in this morning's gospel reading. The Pharisees, interpreting as they thought the law of Moses, discriminated against people according to what they ate - for them, the touchstone of what made people acceptable, or part of the 'in' crowd, part of God's covenant people. It all depended on their diet, whether it was kosher or not. And they defined the requirements in great detail, not just the food, but how it was prepared, what sort of pots and pans were used for cooking and how they were cleaned, and so on. And the point that Jesus makes in response to this is a very simple one and in a sense, a very obvious and uncontroversial point. But it's one that, after 2000 years, we still struggle to accept and apply in our own lives.

And his point is that what defiles a person has nothing to do with the externals, it has nothing to do with diet or washing, or the colour of your skin, or your gender or sexuality, or your level of income, or the culture you come from. What defiles a person rather, is what comes out of them, what comes out of the heart. So when someone lies or slanders someone else or commits adultery or theft or, yes, murder, or when someone just acts dishonestly or maliciously - these are the signs of being defiled. But it's hard to label people in groups by that criterion. In one sense, it's an obvious distinction to make, but in another sense, it's problematic because it's so difficult to generalise about how these things look. Some of the things people have said about Lucy Letby for instance is 'Well, she doesn't look like a mass murderer.' Gangs of far right thugs don't go around beating up liars and slanderers and adulterers because they're harder to spot than black teenagers. But it's also when you start to define defilement in terms of morality, in terms of people's actions and motives and choices, it's harder to scapegoat other people in categories without implicating ourselves.

Hopefully there aren't too many murderers amongst us this morning. Although I did find myself once unwittingly offering hospitality to a man who was wanted for murder and who camped out for a while on our front lawn during the pandemic. But interestingly, of the various homeless people who were calling at the vicarage at that time, it was the guy wanted for murder who was far and away the cleanest, the most polite, the apparently least troubled and the easiest to deal with than any of the others who we were having to handle at that time. But which of us, in a moment of anger, hasn't wished evil upon the person who has upset us? Which of us can say we've never passed on a piece of gossip that has undermined somebody else's reputation? Which of us can say we've always managed to keep clear of lustful thoughts?

One of the big problems with projecting defilement onto other people and treating others as beyond the pale is that it encourages us to feel complacent about ourselves. As soon as we start to say, 'I'm all right, it's them others' then we are avoiding the challenge to look into our own hearts and truly to know ourselves. But if you imagine, for example, that every thought in your head was going to be made public, that every feeling, every opinion, every desire in your heart was somehow magically projected onto a big public screen so that everybody could see it, then I don't think any of us could hold our heads up for more than five minutes. And recognising that requires us to explore and face the truth about ourselves, that actually lurking in our hearts there are all kinds of defilement, things that are rather ugly, things we wish we're rather not there. And that's uncomfortable. It strips away our complacency and undermines our confidence that underneath everything we're really okay.

But from that starting point, we may find ourselves becoming aware of our need for a saviour; a source of cleansing and forgiveness; someone who can provide that deep clean that we need;

someone who can help us not only to see the truth about ourselves, but to help us to change and be set free from those things that defile us.

In one sense, I do feel a bit as though I'm preaching 'bad' news here this morning. But I think the truth is always 'good' news if we can allow it to change us. Jesus says that what defiles us is not the external things that allow us to pigeonhole others, it's the things inside, the things that contaminate our thoughts and attitudes and ideas and that sometimes shape our actions unhelpfully.

But when we know we are helpless, we can find ourselves ready to ask for help; when we know we need cleansing, we can turn to God for sanctification; when we know we need to change, we can call upon our Creator and Redeemer to remake us, to see in us only the perfection of His Son, Jesus Christ, and to give us His Holy Spirit, the Spirit of Christ, to make us more like Jesus.

The good news sometimes has to start with bad news. But when we're willing to face the truth about ourselves we'll find, amazingly, the truth will set us free.

Reading Text

Matthew 15:10-20

¹⁰ Then he called the crowd to him and said to them, 'Listen and understand: ¹¹ it is not what goes into the mouth that defiles a person, but it is what comes out of the mouth that defiles.' ¹² Then the disciples approached and said to him, 'Do you know that the Pharisees took offence when they heard what you said?' ¹³ He answered, 'Every plant that my heavenly Father has not planted will be uprooted. ¹⁴ Let them alone; they are blind guides of the blind. And if one blind person guides another, both will fall into a pit.' ¹⁵ But Peter said to him, 'Explain this parable to us.' ¹⁶ Then he said, 'Are you also still without understanding? ¹⁷ Do you not see that whatever goes into the mouth enters the stomach, and goes out into the sewer? ¹⁸ But what comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart, and this is what defiles. ¹⁹ For out of the heart come evil intentions, murder, adultery, fornication, theft, false witness, slander. ²⁰ These are what defile a person, but to eat with unwashed hands does not defile.'