

The Thirteenth Sunday after Trinity

Collect: Almighty God, who called your Church to bear witness that you were in Christ reconciling the world to yourself: help us to proclaim the good news of your love, that all who hear it may be drawn to you; through him who was lifted up on the cross, and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen.

Psalm 119.33–40

- ³³ Teach me, O Lord, the way of your statutes
and I shall keep it to the end.
- ³⁴ Give me understanding and I shall keep your law;
I shall keep it with my whole heart.
- ³⁵ Lead me in the path of your commandments,
for therein is my delight.
- ³⁶ Incline my heart to your testimonies
and not to unjust gain.
- ³⁷ Turn away my eyes lest they gaze on vanities;
O give me life in your ways.
- ³⁸ Confirm to your servant your promise,
which stands for all who fear you.
- ³⁹ Turn away the reproach which I dread,
because your judgements are good.
- ⁴⁰ Behold, I long for your commandments;
in your righteousness give me life.

Romans 13.8–end: Owe no one anything, except to love one another; for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law. The commandments, ‘You shall not commit adultery; You shall not murder; You shall not steal; You shall not covet’; and any other commandment, are summed up in this word, ‘Love your neighbour as yourself.’ Love does no wrong to a neighbour; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law.

Gospel–Matthew 18.15–20: ‘If another member of the church sins against you, go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone. If the member listens to you, you have regained that one. ¹⁶ But if you are not listened to, take one or two others along with you, so that every word may be confirmed by the evidence of two or three witnesses. ¹⁷ If the member refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if the offender refuses to listen even to the church, let such a one be to you as a Gentile and a tax-collector. ¹⁸ Truly I tell you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven. ¹⁹ Again, truly I tell you, if two of you agree on earth about anything you ask, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven. ²⁰ For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.’

Reflection: “The Vanity of Small Differences” are a series of paintings by Grayson Perry giving a picture of the world as it is but also of how it might be. The paintings remind us that people can become over-anxious, even obsessed about small differences and how it is that small difference can lead to rivalries between people causing so much unhappiness and damage to families, communities and nations. Why is this? I find helpful the work of the French anthropologist Rene Girard. He identifies MIMESIS as being at the heart of the human story and that it is found throughout the Bible: the human desire to want something because the other person has it and that this is what creates conflict which can lead to bitter dispute and sometimes also to violence.

And that there follows in finding the means to conclude things, a focus on a victim on whom all blame for the conflict is placed rather than the causes of the rivalry being addressed. In our human relationships we should be alert to the way we can find ourselves in situations which emphasise the over-against another way of thinking and being. The ways a person might have a bit of a short-term buzz that they or their family or their community is that bit better than another one. This is what the paintings of Grayson Perry led me to think about as I tried to think about how Jesus' disciples so often got things wrong about the world around them, so often in rivalry with each other and how Jesus was showing them a better way that would really make a difference.

Today's passage comes just after Jesus asked Peter who he thinks that Jesus is. Peter gets it partly right, Jesus is a very different leader to Caesar, his kingship coming from God and that to follow Jesus and live in his way is a totally different way of living. Then Peter gets it wrong and not surprisingly he does not want to hear of Jesus being put to death by the religious leaders. It must have sounded a cruel and unnecessary sacrifice. Girard's ground breaking insights show that sacrifice including within religious practice can also be a means of *not* focusing on what is really causing division. Girard emphasises that it is human violence we need saving from, rather than us having a fear of divine violence. The disciples would have been aware of parts of the Old Testament where writers at times confirm the old way of thinking about placating an angry vengeful God through offering a sacrifice but most of the prophets especially Isaiah show a different understanding.

Not for them the placating of an angry god with animal sacrifice, even though this was part of the temple worship, but instead a growing recognition that human behaviour needed to change. The suffering of the servant in Isaiah is because of the terrible behaviour of people and the causes of his suffering is something people need to understand and learn from. So that in the heat of the moment a person might steady any angry frustration, through knowing that things have a way of working themselves out if we can believe and trust that God is working all things for the good.

We have seen that "The Jesus Way" "the suffering servant" is a very different way to what Peter one of those closest to Jesus was expecting of the way of the Messiah. But overall we are left in no doubt that while Peter and the others do not really get it when Jesus was with them; there later comes an understanding of the meaning of Jesus' death and of what it meant for them to believe that he was alive.

What led to Jesus death and how subsequently the followers carried this within them is at the heart of their and our story. Not vanity of small difference but a significantly different way of understanding sacrifice. The sacrifice of the best of people that was not the means of covering up all that divides people and damages relationships but a sacrifice which in Jesus left the victim as the one who could show the way to live, to love and to forgive. Out of this is the way of Jesus which he taught about in the Beatitudes and later how Paul conveys this in his letter to the Romans. Brian McLaren writes "We should use our gifts for the common good, loving others without hypocrisy, living the way Jesus lived and taught; sharing, giving, practicing hospitality, breaking down barriers of race and class, forgiving, reconciling, and so in all these ways overcoming evil with good." Placing the responsibility on an individual to try to do the right thing for the common good and for us all to hold this way at the heart of our common life.