

Sunday Sermon

Revd Canon Charles Jenkin – 14th June 2020 1st Sunday after Trinity

Exodus 19.2-8a; Romans 5.1-8; Matthew 9.35 – 10.8

In our Gospel reading for today, Jesus sends his disciples out to be selfless in healing all they meet. It is a remarkable list: heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse lepers, cast out demons. It's also a very significant list. The inclusion of 'raise the dead' alerts us that this list is more than just a general list of healings. Literally raising the dead is a pretty unusual thing to do even for Jesus himself, and although there are just a very few accounts of raising the dead in the New Testament, it is hardly routine, even for Jesus.

What this phrase therefore actually means therefore, is raising the dead in spirit: those who have fallen into despair, those who have fallen deep into the corruption of their humanity, those who think God has forgotten them, and so on. Which leads us to seeing the others in this list as metaphors too. Cleansing lepers is a metaphor for rescuing those who have been marginalised in society, as lepers literally were. Casting out demons is a metaphor for healing mental illness. The mission to heal, to which those who follow Jesus are called, is remarkably comprehensive.

Moreover the list is best understood as not really being about personal healing but being about the healing of society. Indeed people, especially the vulnerable and the poor, often suffer disproportionately from sickness of various kinds, because what really needs healing is actually society, and communities, and nations, and peoples, and economies. Injustice makes people sick. Poverty makes people sick. Prejudice makes people sick. And when these things become embedded in unjust structures and oppressive countries and societies, they can indeed be regarded as demonic, as taking on a life of their own.

We have become painfully more aware of this during the Coronavirus pandemic. Indeed the crisis has shone a harsh light on a fair number of things about our own nation's attitudes and politics and priorities and ways of life. We have been shaken practically by the effects of such a lockdown as we have never experienced before in living memory. And we are being shaken morally by the social weaknesses of our country that have been so cruelly exposed. Make no mistake, the latter is just as far reaching as the former, perhaps more so.

Christians are of course just as affected by all these things as other people. Christian faith is not a kind of vaccine. However we are given a number of keys of grace which unlock the prison gates, both for ourselves and for others. We are given keys of hope, that we can join in with God's healing of our society and communities. We are given keys of compassion, that despite the challenges to our own sense of wellbeing, enables us to listen well to those who suffer, and to stand with them.

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We are given keys of courage, that whatever the costs of working for change, nothing can separate us from the love of God. And we are given keys of generosity, that we may share the advantages we find we have, because we know that God is constantly generous to us. Keys of hope, compassion, courage and generosity; which our first reading this morning from the letter of Paul to the Romans, speaks deeply. We need to learn to use the keys of God's grace.

One painful thing that the Covid-19 crisis has revealed is the extent to which Britons who are black or Asian or of other minority ethnicity, B A M E people, have been suffering and dying disproportionately from this terrible virus. We do not yet know the full story of this, or what we need to be doing to put this right, but there is no doubt that it has acted to bring to the surface a much deeper and more extensive sense of alienation amongst many BAME communities, than many realised were there.

This has been a shock to the nation. We had complacently come to believe we were doing rather well in overcoming racism, and maybe this country has indeed been doing better than many others. But we have discovered that there is still a long way to go. Many BAME people are frustrated that despite being sure they are loyal and British, they often find themselves feeling at a disadvantage to the majority white community. So the first important thing we all need to do is to listen, have the grace to listen and not be defensive; and then to use our God given keys of grace: hope, compassion, courage, and generosity.

Some BAME people resentfully talk of their experience of white privilege. It is important that everyone listens to this too; this BAME experience is very real, and it is truly painful. But it is not easy to hear, not least because many white people, in all their struggles in life, do not actually feel privileged. Indeed many people come to feel that they have earned their privilege. The thing is, white privilege is not in the first place about overt prejudice or overt racism. It is actually about something deeper and more general.

I would call it Majority Social Advantage and Minority Social Disadvantage; MSA and MSD. though perhaps social scientists have different names for it. MSA and MSD sound like drugs and in a way they are. Majority Social Advantage is something that any human majority has. If you belong to a majority you feel more confident, you feel more accepted, you are less deferential, you feel safer, and you frankly expect more of those around you. If you belong to any sort of minority, not just racial minorities, all these things are more difficult, and sometimes much more difficult. Therefore even if you don't feel particularly privileged, the drug of Majority Social Advantage still gives a high, and the drug of Minority Social Disadvantage still depresses.

What to do? We need to use our keys of grace: keys of hope, keys of compassion, keys of courage and keys of generosity. And we need to use these to recover the sense in a democracy, majorities always, always, need to be compassionate and generous to minorities. As a key democratic principle. This is simply about living well in community. I think as a nation we once understood this, but somehow majorities have come to feel that might is right and that is all that matters. But if democracies behave like this, they become sick.

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If we really want to something about the alienation of so many BAME people, yes of course overt racism must be opposed wherever it raises its ugly head, and yes of course racist structures need to be challenged and changed, and yes of course racist history needs to be confronted and understood. But it is not enough just to talk about equality. Majorities need to own up to their addition to MSA, to Majority Social Advantage, and be ready to do their part in compensating for it, in healing society, as Jesus sends us all to do. And to do this we need to use the keys of grace we have been given; keys of hope, compassion, courage and generosity.

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