

6th Sunday C 11/2/07

Jeremiah 17:5-8, I Cor 15: 12, 16-20; Luke 6:17, 20-26

Our readings this morning seem very much to reflect what an approach to Christianity which we might call “Either – Or”, a term borrowed from the title of a work by the Danish thinker Soren Kierkegaard. Both Jeremiah and Luke present us with blessings and with woes. Paul, in his first letter to the Corinthians, lays it on the line with his challenge to those who deny the resurrection of the dead – either Christ is raised, or your faith is in vain. There is a choice to be made, and we are challenged to be on one side or the other.

The sometimes unfortunate consequences of taking sides couldn't escape my mind on Friday evening, when I travelled across to Leigh-on-Sea in Essex, the place of my curacy, in order to join my former Vicar in the crowd watching Southend United – his team – play Queens Park Rangers – my team. Now as any football fan will tell you, it is particularly hard to watch a game when one is an away fan placed amid the opposing home fans. The rules of etiquette are clear – you don't betray your loyalties, you applaud at all the right moments, you refrain

from any singing or chanting whatsoever. Most importantly of all, if the home team scores, you must rise and join in the celebrations. And this I had to do when Southend scored for their first goal. And when they scored their second goal. And when they scored their third goal. And their fourth goal. And their fifth.

Genuine football fans will also tell you, however, that there is something strangely honourable in the miserable experience which was my Friday night: driving for three hours, sitting in the freezing cold, enduring utter humiliation, and then driving all the way back. It's something to do with identity. It's not an idea too many people on the outside really understand, certainly not people in well to do and intellectual places like Oxford, but my football team and my devotion to it is a part of who I am, and the experience of sharing the terrible times as well as the triumphs – all too few – actually functions, for me at least, as a helpful part of learning about myself and my emotions. The point is that although I have taken a side, nailed my colours to a particular mast, although I have a fixed identity which will never change, the day to day reality of my allegiance is neither high nor low. It is, like everything else in life, the reality of getting on with it, of trying to succeed, of frequently failing, of seeking new ways to improve, of hoping far beyond what we are likely to receive, and so forth.

The most obvious contrast between Luke's presentation of Jesus' famous sermon and Matthew's, is reflected in the names we have given them. Matthew, as we all know, presents a Sermon on the Mount in which Jesus, the new lawgiver, goes up the mountain like Moses but, instead of receiving the written law from the Lord, himself gives the new commandments which make the high demands of righteousness for those who would belong to the kingdom. Luke's sermon is delivered from, literally, a level place – it's usually called the Sermon on the Plain – and is shorter, less grand and rather more disjointed. When Matthew gives us the famous beatitudes, Jesus expresses these indirectly – blessed are the poor in spirit, the meek, those who mourn, etc etc. Luke's Jesus speaks face to face: Blessed are you poor, you who hunger, you that weep, you who are hated. Yours is the condition of the prophets before you.

There is an urgency in this directness which challenges us to sit up and to listen. However, we might regret that listening. For no sooner are four blessings pronounced than Luke – quite unlike Matthew – matches them with four woes. Woe to you who are rich, who are full, who are laughing, who are well thought of. Your state is that of the false prophets.

Two and three weeks ago, considering Jesus's words in the Capernaum synagogue, we noticed that Luke is concerned with our need not just to listen but to hear, to understand what is being said. This morning's gospel was introduced with the news that great crowds were seeking to hear Jesus. The gospel has already presented us with much controversy – controversy about those words in the synagogue, about new and old, about fasting, about healing on the Sabbath. There is expectation and excitement surrounding Jesus and it is expectation of conflict as much as anything else. Jesus does not disappoint, directing his provocations directly at those who would hear. The first words which follow the last verse we heard this morning are, I say to you who would hear, love your enemies.

We are Jesus's listeners, and all this makes disturbing hearing. Woe to the rich, the full, the happy, the respectable. That is surely me. It's probably you. It's not a comfortable thought. And it's not made any less uncomfortable if we realise that Jesus is not saying these things are wrong in themselves, he is observing that they are likely to be an obstacle to us as we seek to be part of the kingdom. If anything, that is a more worrying observation. We are clearly on the wrong side. Our identity is being called into question. Should we really be who we are? Or should we abandon that identity for the sake of the kingdom.

There is no neat way out of this problem. Neither should there be. Christian identity is always going to be problematic. If it were easy for me to be either one thing or the other, either good or bad, either loving or selfish, then all our lives would be very much simpler. The Christian, as Martin Luther famously observed, is *simul justus et peccator* – at once righteous, and a sinner. Those of the church in the West are perhaps well off in the worldly sense, but then our churches are often poor, our society is spiritually hungry, our prayers ascend in weeping for the sufferings of the world, and we are despised and ridiculed on every side and in particular in the ever more dominant media. We are, in one sense, on both sides of the divide, unable to make that choice of Either – Or, acknowledging instead that there is an essential “both – and” to Christian identity.

We shouldn't be surprised. If we read the New Testament with any care we will soon remember that any identity entirely separate from that of Christ was lost to us in baptism. Our life is hid with Christ in God, my identity is essentially linked to that of Christ, and the identity of Christ himself is always double, always divine and human. We are members of his body, parts of his whole. Christian identity can never be single, never fixed, because I am made up of both my weak and stupid self, and ludicrous love of Christ crucified for me. Christian life is the reality of working this out, of getting on with it, of experiencing highs and lows

but also and mostly of living day to day somewhere in the middle of the either-or, living we might say, without our own identity. At least, without it yet, because Christian life is also about being led towards the true identity which we will only gain at the end. My identity is double because it is incomplete. My truest life is the life of Christ dying and living, the life which I cannot live unless I am raised, raised with, and raised by Jesus Christ.