

Sermon - Lent 1 2018 Year B

Let us pray:

God of all,
As we begin our Lenten journey together
help us to walk in the shoes of others
so that your Spirit may fill our shared darkness
with your light and truth, Amen.

Which single word would you use to describe the entire teaching of Jesus Christ? What is it that God wishes us to learn about most of all?

There are many potential contenders: love, peace, forgiveness, justice, salvation, relationship...

All of these, for me, are best summed up in another single word: reconciliation.

In the first letter of Peter set for today we read: 'Christ also suffered for sins once for all, in order to bring you to God.'

In 2 Corinthians 5 St Paul expressed this thus: God through Christ reconciled us to himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation; therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us. We implore you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God.

I'd like us to begin Lent, not solely in a penitential spirit - how might I be a better Christian kind of a way - but by reflecting on the big picture of what God is doing through us. For if we can grasp the big picture a little more clearly,

we might find ourselves more able to see our place within it; little pieces as we are in a huge divine jigsaw.

Our gospel reading focuses on Jesus' baptism and the divine intervention of the Spirit represented in the words: *Your are my Son, the Beloved, with you I am well pleased.*

The significance of these words cannot be under-stated. Before Jesus begins his ministry, God affirms him for who he is, as he is. Equipped with such assurance, Jesus is driven into the challenges of the wilderness.

Every baptism today, whether of a child or adult, a few days old or a century old, mirrors Jesus' baptism. We pray for the Holy Spirit to descend upon those to be baptised and we affirm them for who they are, as they are. No hoops, hurdles, selection criteria or interview questions or theological understanding necessary. All who wish to say yes to Jesus, however partially understood, are welcome, all are affirmed, all may be baptised and then all are jettisoned out into the Christian life to do God's work and struggle with life's challenges; our equivalent of the wilderness. We may be little pieces in a huge divine jigsaw, but each one of us is immeasurably valued by God.

One difficult truth in all of this is that there is much less difference between those who come to church and those who don't than we perhaps sometimes realise. I am as broken and messed up as the next person and I suspect you are to. The difference lies in our acknowledgement of our need of God and of one another. I need the church to help provide me with the spiritual fuel necessary for the days to come, and I receive that through worship, prayer, music and scripture. And I find that the more I engage with

people and places of brokenness, the more I need God, the church and you all to share this journey with.

Una Kroll, in a marvellous little book called 'Crossing Boundaries in Prayer', writes about the 'border land territories' in which our Christian lives are exercised. These border lands are places where differences meet, sometimes, sharp differences. For example, opposite sides in a war or fundamental differences of outlook or viewpoint. The Brexit negotiations are a clear example of such a border land. But such border lands exist in all of our lives, within all of the communities and networks of which we are a part, all of the time. Differences within families, relationships, with work colleagues; differences of theology within the national church, differences of outlook within our own church and community. Una Kroll emphasises that it is in these difficult border lands that the reconciling work of God is undertaken and where the power of prayer can be most evident.

As *Strictly Come Dancing* draws towards its climax, the remaining couples are required to all take to the floor at once, dancing the same dance to the same music but without bumping into one another.

That seems to me a good analogy for a lot of family, church, work and community life at times. Within our sub-groups at home, in church, at our place of work or in the community we rub along pretty well most of time, sometimes most fruitfully by avoiding knocking into one another, with all the fear of catastrophic relationship fallout that might result.

Yet it is in these borderlands between individuals and

groups within church, at work or in the community, where the reconciling love of God is most needed and where energy expended will prove both most costly and most transformative.

My invitation this Lent is for us all to identify and acknowledge to ourselves and to God our own borderlands; those places of potential tension and conflict in our lives that we try to avoid. Whatever your context, it is these borderlands where the exercise of your Christian faith may be most needed.

Out of all of the tools we have available to assist us in this, prayer is the most important. Prayer takes many forms of course, but at its heart, prayer is an invitation for us to participate with the Holy Spirit in entering into a situation of challenge, need, crises, and to effect change.

Now as you know I hold some quite strong opinions - and in that I am no different to everyone else. God's work of reconciliation however, requires us to set aside all our strongly held opinions - however righteous we might feel about them - in order to step into the shoes of the other. For it is only when we see the world through someone else's eyes, can we begin to appreciate that truths, that are obvious to us, are far from clear cut to someone else. Effective change is only achieved when everyone is carried forwards together - any other result leaves God's world still fractured and unreconciled.

This is how a degree of peace has become established in Northern Ireland for example, and the frailty of human nature shows how precarious a peace it is.

Reconciliation is the big picture activity of God in the world. At our own micro level it is also the work in which each of us should try to be engaged, especially in the borderlands of our life where challenges - wilderness experiences - lurk with anxiety and even fear.

This is not easy but we journey through Lent accompanying Jesus whose wilderness experience provided the foundation for the fruitfulness of his ministry. With the help of the Holy Spirit so it may prove for us too.

Amen.