

SERMON for Pentecost 18 – September 22nd, 2024.

Readings: Jeremiah 11: 18-20; Psalm 54; James 3: 1-12 & Mark 9: 30-37.

God be in my head and in my understanding;

God be in my heart and in my thinking;¹

We sang this to welcome in the Gospel. A hymn which is an ancient prayer. I ‘goggled’ it to see if I could find out more of its origins, besides what we have in our hymn book “Richard Pynson’s *Horae BVM Sarum* 1514, and came across:

... is at least late medieval in origin and first written in France by an unknown author. It appeared in English in 1490 and was printed in a book of hours, which was a liturgy for those who wished for a monastic pattern of prayer.²

Why am I going down this track, you may ask?!

Jeremiah speaks of the “Lord of hosts, who judge righteously, who try the heart and mind ...” [Jeremiah 11:20a].

James talks about the responsibility of those in authority and how they “will be judged with greater strictness” [James 3:1b]

He goes on to say:

For we all make mistakes. [James 3: 2a]

How true is that!! And James goes on to place the tongue at the root of much of the trouble.

Most of the world’s problems, let alone the problems we experience, are caused by a wayward, unkind tongue ... often our own!

Our Gospel reading continues the themes of “nobody is perfect” and “the dangers of a wayward tongue”! The little snippet we get this morning comes after a series of events on the disciples’ journey with Jesus.

Jesus must have had endless stores of patience with his disciples; after talking to them again about his impending suffering and death, they still didn’t get it and were more concerned about who was the greatest amongst them!

This moment reveals a fundamental truth about human nature. We often seek status, recognition and power. Whether Jesus heard the disciples’ “discussion” or not, he was certainly aware of their thoughts.

How often have we been aware of God’s truth, “My thoughts are not your thoughts”, and Jesus uses this incident to turn their understanding upside down.

Rather than argue the toss with them, Jesus takes a little child and places the child in front of the disciples and says:

Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me. [Mark 9:37]

We know of the respect and credence Jesus gave to the women he met and spent time with. We know that how he treated the women in his life, and those who crossed his path was very different to the cultural norm. Now we see another example of his reinterpretation of his society’s rules.

In the culture of the time, children had little value and were often seen as insignificant. As he did with women, he elevates their status, showing that true greatness in his Kingdom is not about authority or accolades, but about humility and service.

In much of our society today, ‘humility’ seems a lost art. To be humble is not about being a doormat, rather it is about being aware of our talents and gifts and using them for the building up of the communities in which we live, move and have our being, giving thanks to God for these gifts and not seeking to big note ourselves before others.

When Jesus puts forward a child as a teaching point, he is challenging his disciples and us to understand that we are invited into vulnerability, to humility and littleness, not into greatness!

Even more radically, Jesus says that when we welcome a child, the vulnerable and humble, we are not only stooping down out of our greatness and importance to be kind but that we are seeing Jesus and the One who sent him! In other words, God is present in the vulnerable and humble and the Jesus we seek to follow is also vulnerable and humble.³

This incident with the disciples and the example of the child, draws for me four points:

Firstly, to embrace a childlike humility – Jesus calls us to approach life with a heart like that of a child – trusting, open, and willing to learn. Rarely do we hear of or see young children striving for power; they rely on others. This is a reminder for us to depend on God, recognizing our need for God's guidance and grace.

Secondly, it encourages us to reassess our values – the disciples were caught up in competition, striving for recognition. Jesus challenges us to reassess what we value. In our world which often rewards pride and ambition, we are called to value humility and servanthood. Are we seeking to uplift ourselves, or are we looking to lift up others?

Thirdly, do we welcome the least among us? Unfortunately, here at St Leonard's, we rarely are blessed with little ones, but do we, would we welcome them? Are we prepared to change our ways to embrace them? I think that that might have been one of the questions Archdeacon Geoff put to Parish Council last Sunday in the meeting he had with them. How children friendly are we in this parish?!

By welcoming children, Jesus illustrates the importance of embracing those who society often overlooks. This isn't just about physical children; it's about those marginalised, the vulnerable, and the forgotten. When we serve and love the least among us, we reflect the heart of Christ.

Finally, we are called to serve. Humility is ultimately about serving other. Jesus modelled this perfectly throughout his life, culminating in his ultimate act of sacrificial love on the cross. As we reflect on our actions and motivations, we must ask ourselves: how can I / we serve those around me? How can I / we be most affective as a source of love and support?

For me today, the hymn we have just sung became so relevant in light of these readings:

God be in my head and in my understanding;

God be in my heart and in my thinking;¹

Remember the danger of a tongue used without discipline.

Remember that in God's kingdom, the greatest is the one who serves.

My prayer is that we may carry within us a spirit of humility, a willingness to learn from others, to treat others with respect and dignity and a commitment to serve those in need.

In Jesus' name. Amen.

Revd Sally Buckley tssf
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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS:

1. According to *Together in Song*, attributed to Richard Pynson's *Horae B.V.M.* Sarum 1514.
2. Google answer to *Where did the prayer God be in my head come from.*
3. Revd Sue Lodge-Calvert, *Welcoming Littleness*, as posted on her blog www.companionsontheway.com on September 18, 2024.