



Sunday, 15 September 2019 – Trinity 13
Sermon for 10.00am Eucharist at St Andrew's Parish Church Guernsey
Readings: Exodus 32: 7-14 and Gospel of St Luke 15: 1-10
Given by Rev Juliette E C Robilliard

Telling it as it is or dumbing down?

I said in my welcome to this service that the hardest task for a preacher is to be faithful to the text even if the message seems utterly offensive to our modern ears. The reading from Exodus is challenging. How do we make sense of a God who is loving yet, we also hear, can be wrathful? The temptation is to glide over the hard message and talk about a softer option but that would be foolhardy and not faithful.

Parenting – what's it all about?

I'm assuming that those of you who are parents used routine parenting skills when bringing up your children: neither so laid back that your children ran wild nor using excessive discipline that would have intimidated them. Your love for them will have shown itself in many ways. Affection; encouraging them as you taught them life-skills; caring for their needs; the bank of Mum and Dad! Whilst, at times being totally exasperated with them! Not because you didn't love them, but angry when they ignored your advice and ended up hurting themselves, needing lessons to be re-learned the hard way. If I'm right in my assessment, then I think that is what God is feeling in Exodus.

God's faithfulness v God's frustration

God has been faithful to his covenant made with Abraham and led the Israelites away from tyranny in Egypt. He's promised to provide them with a land that they can call their own. On their journey he's ensured that they have not starved and has given them guiding signs by day and by night as evidence of his divine direction. But they, respond capriciously, by treating their faith like a commodity and not a covenant. Similar to casting off a garment from last year's wardrobe, they have had their heads turned by the latest fashionable god of the nations through which they are passing. Like greedy children having a temper tantrum, they don't want wait for the Promised Land they want it NOW!!! So, they grasp the tangibles they can see rather than trust God's timing and by so doing they are harmed in body, mind and spirit and worse, harm their relationship with God suffers. No wonder, out of sorrow, he's angry with them. God tells Moses on the mountain of his frustration. On hearing of their disobedience Moses pleads for them imploring God not to let the Egyptians, have the satisfaction of thinking that he's a perverse God. "Don't let them think that you drew the Israelites away from Egypt only to destroy them in the desert." This is a reminder that whenever the Israelites and, indeed, we Christians are wilful, it reflects badly on God.

Our prayers – do they work?

Moses pressed God earnestly to let his anger subside and God agreed lovingly enabling the Israelites to have another chance. This I think shows the value of our intercessions not only for ourselves but on behalf of other people. God hears and answers prayer, which may not be exactly what we asked for but is best for our individual needs.

How quickly we forget!

Today's reading doesn't plug the gap, so allow me. Wouldn't it be wonderful if, when Moses went back down the mountain, he merely gave them a parental ticking off, that all were contrite and then it was love and hugs all round. Seldom, however, does real life reflect a totally happy ending. On seeing how the Israelites are defiling God's sacred covenant Moses' anger boils over! Instead of seeking guidance from God, he directs the Levites, to make an example of the wayward Israelites and they slaughter 3,000 men, women and children. And, mark this, he tells the Levites "Today by your zeal, you have ordained yourselves for the service of God!" If that's the result of self-ordination, thank God that today we priests undergo a process of rigorous discernment and do not ordain ourselves!

God's justice and his mercy

Leaders, indeed anyone, who acts in the heat of the moment meting out punishment believing it to be justice, are in danger of forgetting that the justice of God comes also with mercy. Whilst it's cliché, it's also a truism that God is almighty not all-matey and we do well to respect him. The Psalmist understood this completely when he said "What are mortals, that you should be mindful of them; mere human beings, that you should seek them out?" God's justice and discipline refine our flaws for our long-term well-being, bringing healing and wholeness not oblivion. Fine words but how can we be assured that God isn't fickle loving us one minute but, on a whim, punishing the next. Let's turn to the Gospel to find out.

Remember what happens when we point a finger!

Here's a classic case of finger-pointing by the Pharisees and Scribes, who decry Jesus' engagement with the so-called sinners forgetting that pointing a finger means others are pointing back at ourselves: even one sin makes us impure in God's sight. Jesus in his parable shows us the incarnate loving heart of God in action. The parable, so well-known to us, of the little, lost lamb shows that God has no favourites caring only for the righteous people, on the contrary every individual, wayward soul matters to him evoking his compassion. He seeks out all lost souls longing for them to turn to him and be redeemed.

What's on it for us?

What do we take from these readings? Self-reliance is the greatest deterrent to faithful discipleship. Just like any lost lamb we need to bleat to be found. "Lord, I'm sorry I ran off in the wrong direction, please forgive me and save me: I'll try harder next time." And, just like any loving parent, God rejoices when we do. Amen.