

Canon Jonnie Parkin

“I desire mercy, not sacrifice.”

Matthew 12.1–21

Evensong 13th Sunday after Trinity. 20th October 2024

“Took your shirt in”. “Do your tie up.” “Put your blazer on.” “Wear your lanyard”. “Enter the classroom silently”. Schools need rules. Rules are there to help build a positive culture, but sometimes we get so preoccupied with the rules we forget about the culture the rules are supposed to help build. This evening’s reading from Matthew is an example. The religious types are cross with Jesus because his disciples were picking corn on the sabbath. You were not allowed to do anything that could be seen as work on the sabbath. This was supposed to help people and planet rest from their hard work, and remember the God who rested after creating the earth. It became another burden and imposition that was exhausting to follow.

For us religious types there is a real temptation to see religious observance as the thing that gives value and worth. We will be OK with God if we stick to the rules. Sometimes the rules clash. We then need rules to rule which rule rules, and suddenly being virtuous has become the realm of experts, the religious lawyers of Jesus’ day. Sometimes religious types try and trick religious opponents with gotcha questions to show that they have not fully understood the rules. Running the gauntlet of that was a daily occurrence for Jesus, even before twitter.

Of course, the rules would inevitably be broken as the demands of the lawyers became impossible to meet. When following the lawyers is too hard, we turn to the priests. So the sacrificial temple cult emerges with a codified system to offset our guilt when we break the rules, so if we fail to love god or neighbour, we can offer a sacrifice instead of being punished. The impetus becomes about being innocent of wrong rather than becoming lovingly good, and religion becomes a buy your way out of trouble scam.

But Jesus knew an idol when he saw one. Something greater than the temple was here. Religion without relationship is a form of idolatry. Religious rules are there to help us love God and love neighbour as self. That is the positive culture they are supposed to build. But slavishly following rules for the sake of following the misses the point, as does a transactional approach to what to do when the rules are broken. What is intended as a means of grace becomes an idol. For Jesus, God is more interested in genuine compassion than performative compliance. This places Jesus firmly in the Jewish prophetic tradition. He quotes from the prophet Hosea a theme that emerges like a golden thread throughout the Jewish prophetic literature. God desires mercy, or in the Hebrew, loving kindness, not sacrifice. God wants right relationship, not religiosity.

I am saying this not so much with an elephant in the room, but with a big inflatable planet behind me. If we are going to address the climate and ecological emergency, it won't be just with rules alone, though rules will be important. We know that the biggest polluters have the biggest pockets, and the biggest pockets have the most expensive lawyers in them. Rules alone won't get us out of the climate crisis.

Nor will carbon offset schemes, the ecological equivalent of the sacrificial cult or a plenary indulgence. Yes we do need to sequester carbon back out of the atmosphere, but we should be doing that on a huge scale as a whole society as a matter of course, not just individuals trying to assuage our conscience and personal carbon foot print with sacrificial offerings after jetting off to the canaries.

Ecological Laws and sacrificial carbon offset schemes are necessary, but they are not enough. We need to change our hearts and minds, to reimagine our relationship with our planet home and God's creation. We need conversion, metanoia, radical repentance of heart mind and actions. We need to be healed from our desires to control, manipulate and amass wealth. we need to learn to what it means to show loving kindness to our planet and those we share it with. It is not ultimately about us being innocent of causing ecological harm or buying offsets so we can be forgiven for the harm we have caused. It is about us helping God to heal God's creation, giving the earth time to rest and heal, genuine sabbath, because God desires loving kindness and mercy, not sacrifice.

Prayers

God of love,
Many waters cannot quench love,
neither can the floods drown it.
Help us to love you, and to love neighbour as self.
Help us to be people of mercy and loving kindness,
Treading lightly on your glorious creation.

Preserve us from the temptation to try and buy our way out of guilt,
Or to profit from that desire in others.
Help us rather to present ourselves as a living sacrifice,
As people who live selflessly and compassionately,
With a self-offering love stronger than death.

Call us out of the darkness of our selfish exploitation of your creation,
Into your marvellous light,
That we maybe a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation;
A light to a world lost in the darkness of human sin.
Help us to be people of grace.
And so we say together, The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ...