

Sermon 11/06/23

Faith – and friendship

Well, there we were at the end of a bbq. The coals were cooling and there was not a sausage in sight when it was suggested that we needed some chocolate to finish with. An expedition set out to the Co-op and returned with a selection including two bars in which the pieces instead of being in a regular grid were seemingly arranged at random. This is what it said inside the wrapper –

‘To us it doesn’t make sense for chocolate bars to be divided into chunks of equal sizes when there is so much inequality in the chocolate industry. The uneven sized chunks of our bars are a nice way of reminding our Choco fans that the profits in the chocolate industry are unfairly divided’

That chocolate bar seemed to be like the church. We are all Christians although we come in different shapes and sizes, different approaches to faith, different places in our lives both as Christians and generally. But we are all held together by our faith and to an outsider form a homogenous block that they see as ‘churchgoers’. (Possibly as something less congenial but I’m not talking about that this morning!)

The Gospel reading this morning gives us several different pictures of faith.

We start with Matthew. He is at dinner. The exact words are ambiguous as to whether Jesus or Matthew was hosting this meal but it doesn’t really matter. Matthew had sufficient faith in the

goodness of what Jesus was teaching that he felt able to invite his fellow tax-collectors as well as the disciples to sit at the same table and eat together. Then there is the official. His faith is so strong that he believes Jesus only has to lay his hand on his daughter who has died and she will be brought back to life. And the woman in the crowd – only to touch his cloak anonymously and she believed she would be healed. In each case their faith gave the outcome they hoped for.

In a society that has mostly moved on from strict rules about etiquette we can fail to grasp the total significance of these events. Jewish tradition was strict and certain things would make people unclean, and those who came into contact with them were also considered unclean. The physical infection related to death and bleeding, or the moral infection from sinners. Once again Jesus has stuck his head above the parapet, outraged the Pharisees, and treated people who would normally have been avoided with the utmost friendship. He dined with sinners. He touched a dead girl. He knew when the healing had gone from him to the desperate woman. The last two are miraculous events, and Jesus performed them to benefit people he would be expected to avoid. And again, we must take our minds into the time in which this was set – there was no modern medicine leading to significant recovery – these were miracles.

The people in these stories showed Jesus the strength of their faith. In return he gave them friendship. He sat down to eat with tax collectors and sinners, he gave assurance to the official by sending away the professional mourners. He turned and spoke to the

woman. She did not expect acknowledgement - he offered friendship and reassurance.

Like the pieces of that bar of chocolate we Christians come in different shapes and sizes. We have different ways of celebrating our faith. While for some that must be quiet and contemplative, for others it must be formal and predictable, or boisterous and spontaneous. And we will appreciate different styles of worship at different times. What matters is that we feel able to worship as works for us and to respect that others may be needing something different.

How we demonstrate our faith to others also matters. There are well known precedents of athletes refusing to race on Sundays. People for whom it is a day set aside for family activities that nothing can divert. And we are familiar with the story of Mary and Martha, two sisters one of whom was active for Jesus, the other still and listening. But we have all been commissioned to show love, to love one another, and to spread the gospel. Spreading the Gospel is not specifically described as preaching, it can as easily be by example and by how we show our love and friendship.

Now this was the point when sermon block hit – the ‘I know its only Wednesday but I can’t imagine I will have anything useful to say by Sunday’ feeling. So I am indebted to the July edition of Good Housekeeping for digging me out of a hole. In an article on joyful living, it says the following, ‘When we commit to befriending everyone, we can accept them regardless of who they are or what they believe. We can find the friend in them, even if it’s only a small slice of who they are.’

That differentiation between being friends, probably with a finite group of others however large, and showing friendship, potentially to everyone we cross paths with is so important. This is not difficult. From the kitchen we watch people as they come into the Welcome café on a Tuesday. Do they make a beeline for their special friends, bringing extra chairs when there are none there? Or do they look for a space and talk to whoever they are sitting with? They may move to sit with someone they don’t know. Some people flit about talking to everyone – difficult for the servers but such a positive sign of welcome. Those of us who run the café are on the lookout for people on their own and are delighted when everyone is chatting away to each other. Showing our commitment to our faith by showing our commitment to friendship is as simple as that. We are commissioned to spread the gospel to tell of our friend who walks with us through the good times and the bad. But in showing friendship to people we don’t know we don’t need to ignore the people we are already friends with. Jesus and his disciples sat down to dinner with the tax collectors and sinners, he was not there on his own.

In a traditional chocolate bar where all the pieces are the same size and shape they fit together neatly and allow us to divide the bar equally between chocolate lovers. But the irregular bar offers so much more. Finding out which shape fits with another, debates over size and shape, and best of all fitting those diverse shapes together to form a block of loveliness. Within the wrapper there are pieces waiting for us to try them, as there are people within and outside of the church that we have yet to befriend.

