

## **WE ARE ALL SINNERS IN NEED OF THE GRACE OF GOD**

Last weekend I was at a conference of Christians in secular ministry. It is an opportunity for a small group of those who, like me, minister primarily in their workplace to reflect together on our calling. This conference was led by the Revd Richard Collins, parish priest in Lumley, and director of ordinands for the diocese of Durham. He took as his theme the ABC of MSE or absolution, blessing and celebration in our workplace contexts.

We explored absolution firstly through a scripture passage, and an image inspired by that passage. We had a wide-ranging discussion, which touched on the ease with which we accuse or judge others, similarly that there is often more to a person's story than first appears, and that forgiveness demands a transformation. Individually, we then tried to write a definition of absolution that would be understandable in our workplace contexts. It was surprising how few of us tried to do so without mentioning God or Jesus!

Later, we went on a number of visits. I went to Snythomer, a manufacturer of emulsion polymers – what's that I hear you ask – they're found in our PVC doors and windows – where we toured the factory. As we did so, the safety manager – our guide – told us of a recent mistake where someone had had to collect two samples; the first of the samples took time to collect, so he left the valve open while he went to collect the second. He then forgot about the first, resulting in a major spillage of solvent. This happened a couple of days before a routine health and safety executive visit. The person responsible confessed, and thought "he would be walking down the road". Instead, he was thanked, and a new mechanism was fitted to the valve meaning it can't be left open in future.

Our group found this a compelling parable of absolution – and in conversation after the tour, discovered it was not the only case where our perhaps pejorative expectations of a commercial enterprise were confounded. There had been over the past fifteen years or so shifts in attitude and culture the ultimate aim of which was improved safety.

Reflecting since, I wonder what the attitude of others might be, say, if at work someone was injured or killed, or if there was an accident involving property or people. Would families or the community seek to understand, or seek justice? I think the natural human desire is the latter.

We see this in David's reaction to Nathan's parable in our reading from the second book of Samuel. The rich man with many flocks and herds, when needing to feed an unexpected guest, takes the one ewe lamb of a poor man to be killed and cooked. Worse, it was not just the only ewe lamb the poor man had, but one that he had care for like a daughter.

A few years ago I could not have identified so easily with that relationship between human and animal. But when I got to know Rachel I also got to know Kelsey and Westow, her then kittens. Now they are three years old, and they greet me when I get home, they'll snuggle up in bed, and they'll wake me in the morning to be fed. Depending on your point of view, I'm either loving and kind, or the cats have me wrapped around one of their paws. So in Nathan's parable, it's not just the inequality that angers me, but the misery and grief that would ensue from the destruction of the

relationship between the man and his ewe lamb. David is similarly reviled: the rich man deserves to die, with reparation fourfold to the poor man. Like David, I don't want to offer absolution but demand justice.

But Nathan exclaims, "You are the man!" The tables are turned: it is David who has misused the power and wealth with which he had been endowed by Yahweh. Nathan reminds him that he had been anointed king, rescued from Saul, been given Saul's dynasty and his concubines, and also bequeathed the two kingdoms of Israel and Judah. Yet despite all this, David showed no compassion, stole Uriah's wife, and then had her husband killed – both capital crimes in the Torah. He would be punished.

David, in the Messianic line of descent, whom we think of as righteous and just, had over-reached himself – abusing his power and in consequence usurping God. It is easy to look askance at others – David did so when he heard the parable, we do so when stories appear in the newspapers such as those about John Sewel in the Sun last week – but if we hold a mirror up to ourselves, we would probably find that we are not as faultless and flawless as we would like to think.

This week I went to a two hour workshop on unconscious bias. I'd been to something like it before, but it was worth being reminded that the human condition means we *are* all biased, that what's important is accepting it, and then controlling for it. A good example of an unconscious bias might be the assumption that because someone struggled in one task or assignment, that is to be expected in other pieces of work, leading to the sense that they are a poor performer, rather than identifying their strengths and allocating work accordingly. I know that my management team and I are guilty of making assumptions about how well someone will do a particular task or assignment based on our past experience. The dilemma is how to enable someone to do what they are good at, when we might not know what that is, or it might not be what needs doing.

Those same biases and dilemmas exist in our world. So we are part of an unequal sharing of global wealth, in which some have a home and others do not, some have food and others do not, some have clothes and others do not. These are injustices that have pervaded our world for millennia – as the story of David shows.

So should it be a surprise that the crowd whom Jesus had fed from five loaves and two fish seek him out to feed them again? He had sated their hunger on an epic scale. From nothing they not only had enough for everyone to be fed but some food left over. After such a lavish feast, who would not want another? But was this greed, or more likely a very basic instinct to be fed, perhaps when you don't know from where your next meal will come or if it will be more than a meagre portion of gruel?

Yet in seeking a second banquet, this crowd misunderstood what the original feeding had signified. They recalled their forefathers' eating manna in the desert (31, cf Ex 16: 20) which to their minds resembled their feeding experience; they thought of Jesus as a prophet in the tradition of Moses (14, 31). So Jesus tells them, "...you are looking for me, not because you saw signs, but because you ate your fill of the loaves" (26).

A little under three years ago I presided over my first baptism at Belvedere. I said to Max's parents that the sacrament was a different kind of gift that would take

some explaining when he grew old enough, because it was not the kind of gift one can buy in an instant in a shop or online at Amazon. It was not the kind of gift that could be replayed over and over again, because it's not on Youtube, or available on a DVD box set or Blu-ray disc. It was not the kind of gift that could be touched, heard, seen or smelt. This was a gift that could only be recalled through them telling Max the story of God's love, how we baptise to signify His grace, showing the certificate, Bible and candle (and possibly a picture or two from after the sacrament itself) – because this was a gift that wouldn't end, and only began there. It was (and is) unique to Max, and only his parents and godparents could ensure he comes to know of its riches.

I explained all this because so often what people remember of baptism is the sprinkling of water on them (and whether they cried), or perhaps the naming (especially if there are difficult to pronounce middle names). In so remembering, we miss the sign of God's grace, just as the crowd missed the sign of Jesus' identity in their feeding.

Just as I explained baptism to Max's parents, Jesus now explains to the crowd the difference between the bread they had eaten the previous day, and the food of the kingdom. "Do not work for the food that perishes but for the food that endures for eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you..." (27). The bread they had tasted would fill their stomachs for a time before they would be hungry again; what Jesus was offering to them was 'food' that would endure, so they would never again be hungry. But the crowd again fail to see Jesus as the Son of Man by whom they will be 'fed', focusing on 'work' rather than 'food'. "What must we do to perform the works of God?" Jesus answered them, "This is the work of God, that you believe in he whom he has sent." (29)

This is the crux of today's Gospel, and it is as apposite today as it was when Jesus first spoke it or John recorded it.

Are we like the crowd, following Jesus to the other side of the sea of Galilee because they tasted a miracle but did not see the sign? Or are we people of faith who believe, and so see signs in daily life of God's kingdom? Is the parable of the sampler who was forgiven by his bosses that I told at the beginning just the way the firm does things, or a sign of a kingdom way of being in business?

Are we like the crowd, measuring our wealth in earthly riches? Or are we people of faith seeking spiritual wealth through prayer, scripture and worship? Is the story of a peer caught up in drugs and prostitution a cause for scorn, or for care and concern because, as one of our former Presidents said, we are all sinners in need of the grace of God? Do we recognise in the story of David our imperfections and the need to confess them?

Are we like the crowd wanting to be fed with more bread, or are we a sacramental people expectant than in the bread and wine we share, God in Christ is made known to us through the Spirit? As one of the priests I was with last weekend challenged us, when later we say, in reply to Sue's 'The Lord is here', 'His Spirit is with us', will we really mean it? Are we an expectant and hopeful people, believing that God can and is doing so much more than some people in God's world would have us believe?

Let us not be “tossed to and fro” and “blown about” as the letter to the Ephesians has it, but “grow up” to fulfil each of our callings, building up the body of Christ to which we belong – because we believe – and because we believe, to which we want ever more people to belong.

Amen.