

MF SERMON 19'7'15 (Jer. 23: 1-6; Ephsns 2: 11-22; Mark 6: 30-34, 53-56)

May I speak in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. †

PART 1:

Have you ever mislaid a child? - I did last Tuesday(!)

I look after my two little grandsons one day a week. The older one is a confident 3½ -year old, his baby brother is just 11 months. This week, I took them to Marwell Zoo. After lunch we sat on the grass beneath a tree while I changed the baby (which takes all my attention). When I looked up I found that his brother had vanished! I couldn't see him.

Bundling the baby into the buggy, I looked further and further, but I couldn't find him. Panic set in, and I started asking people if they'd seen him, no one had. Eventually, the husband of a couple I had previously asked came up and told me they'd just found him. (My grandson insisted that he'd just wandered round the corner to look at some animals, but I hadn't seen him).

You can imagine how I felt – *cross* with my grandson (since I'd already explained that he mustn't wander off without asking), immensely *relieved*, but above all *guilty* and *ashamed* for not looking after him properly. It's bad enough to mislay your *own* child, but to mislay someone *else's* child when you've been *entrusted* with their care....!

Unless you keep an eye on small children they are likely to wander off and stray into danger - a bit like *sheep*, in fact.

That image of *sheep*, and their need for a good *shepherd* to guide and protect them, is one that features in today's Bible readings.

PART 2:

Although we don't normally have a Sunday morning psalm at St Faith's, the one specified by the Lectionary for today is Psalm 23, *The Lord is my Shepherd*.

In our OT reading, though, we hear the prophet Jeremiah issuing a *warning* to the leaders and priests of God's chosen people because *they* have been *bad* shepherds - their neglect has let God's people stray into danger and become scattered.

God had chosen to reveal himself to the human race God through their ancestor Abraham, with whom he established a *Covenant* – this involved a solemn promise on both sides that Abraham and

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his descendants would love God, follow God's ways, and worship only him; and God, in turn, would cherish them, and ensure their development.

Far from being a *legalistic* contract, though, this Covenant entailed the sort of loving *attachment* that binds parents and children, husbands and wives –[the Hebrew word used for this affectionate commitment is '*hesed*']. This covenant was later renewed and extended when God spoke with Moses on Mt Sinai; at that time the Israelites undertook to follow the Commandments that Moses received from God - i.e. the Ten Commandments that have come down to us, and which Jesus endorsed.

BUT God's people showed a lamentable tendency to ignore God's Commandments, and hedge their bets by following the superstitions of the pagan peoples around them. To ensure prosperity, they worshipped idols, sometimes even sacrificing their own children to these.

They had broken their Covenant with God. And their prophets, like Jeremiah, repeatedly foretold that this would lead to disaster. (And it did - the mighty Babylonian empire destroyed Jerusalem and most of the people were exiled to far off Babylon for a whole generation.)

In our reading, Jeremiah warns that God will deal with the faithless 'shepherds' of his people. But, he says, that's not the end of the story because such is God's *love* and *forbearance* that he won't give up on his people. At some future point, God will bring them back, and he will raise up *other* 'shepherds' who will protect and guide them *properly*.

Jeremiah's reference to God's promise of a 'righteous branch' for David's line has been interpreted by some Christian writers as prophesying the coming of *Jesus* to rescue humanity.

PART 3:

Our Gospel reading from Mark takes up the theme of those who are supposed to be the 'shepherds' of God's people have been failing in their duties.

The disciples are exhausted after returning from their first missionary journey. So Jesus suggests they come with him to a secluded place, so they can rest and recover their energy. [We all need time out to recharge our batteries - Jesus and his disciples were no exception].

BUT they're thwarted by the crowds flocking to hear Jesus, who have followed them.

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Instead of sending them away, though, we're told that Jesus has *compassion* for them and his heart goes out to them.

Why? – because they've been *failed* by the '*shepherds*' who should have cared for and 'fed' them with the *truth* about God – that is, their priests and teachers.

Afterwards, there's a hint that Jesus is angry with his disciples for *their* lack of compassion, and for failing to understand that *their* teacher has come for *everyone* - Jesus has to teach them to be generous givers of themselves in helping to make God's kingdom come.

As Paul explains in his letter to the Ephesians, from which we also heard just now, although God's Covenant promises were originally focussed on the people of ancient Israel, that was over-written by Jesus' gift of his own flesh to make *all people one* humanity – God's new covenant extends to us all.

PART 4:

A recent book by Mark Stibbe, '*My Father's Tears*', throws more light on all this. And I'd like to share some of the main points he makes with you.

For many of us God can seem aloof and far away, like an absent father. (Particularly if our experience of our own father hasn't been particularly positive). Many of us are like lost sheep – 'spiritual orphans', who live with an agonising sense of God's remoteness (as I did until about 6 years ago).

As Mark Stibbe points out, however, the overarching 'big story' behind the OT concerns God's adoption of an unremarkable people, the Israelites, not because of any particular virtue of theirs but simply because of his loving kindness. God needs to be seen as a loving adoptive father. And from this several things follow.

God's purpose isn't just concerned with obedience. He wants a close loving relationship with human beings in which they will freely return his love.

But like sheep, or wayward children, his chosen people keep wandering off – forgetting his commandments, agreed with Moses on Mt Sinai, and even turning to pagan idol worship.

This isn't simply a source of anger to God, but also of distress – as the prophet Hosea describes:

"when Israel was a child I loved him. Out of Egypt I called my son (ie Israel). But the more they were

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called the more they went away from me. They sacrificed to the [pagan idols] and burned incense to them”

So we find God speaking as a doting adoptive father whose children seem to reject his love and choose behaviour that leads them into danger and enslavement, which breaks his heart.

And this is later echoed in Jesus’ parable of the prodigal son.

Ancient Israel’s failure to live up to God’s standards as his adopted children was tragic, but not terminal because a descendant of King David was eventually to be born – and through that Jewish boy (whose name was Jesus) human beings would be enabled to find their way back into the arms of their heavenly father.

By Jesus’ day, the original ethic of *love* underlying God’s commandments had been pushed into the background. The religious leaders had created a love of the law for its own sake – holiness was defined in terms of following the *rules* [not unlike the mediaeval church in Europe!]. It seemed more about the leaders’ power than about God, as Jesus recognised.

For many, the Law felt more like a curse than a blessing - a set of standards that they found impossible to stick to, so they were dominated by *fear* (just as slaves are).

As a Jewish boy, Jesus must have faced the same challenges. Since he was fully human as well as divine, his human body was prone to the same *temptations* as us (anger, lust, greed, etc).

YET Jesus never sinned. As the NT tells us, he lived in complete obedience to his heavenly Father’s values. He later sums up what those values are when he’s asked what the greatest Commandment is – ‘Love the Lord God with all your soul, all your heart, all your mind, and all your strength; and love your neighbour as yourself.’ Here we see the heart of God.

Unlike anyone else, though, Jesus follows all the Father’s laws - and not through *fear*, but through intimate *love*. So breaking any of God’s laws was unthinkable for him.

He behaves like a *son* to the Father, and he assures the rest of us that we should approach God as our affectionate, loving father, using the intimate term *Abba* when we pray – which can be translated as ‘dearest Papa’.

Jesus showed us what it’s like to live like a son or daughter of God, not just a slave to the law. If he behaves like a son in relation to God, he behaves like a brother to the people around him – at his

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meal tables people of all kinds are invited to come just as they are – rich, poor, crooked tax collectors, even prostitutes - but as the gospels show, in the presence of God's love reflected through Jesus they're unlikely to stay the same (just think of Levi the tax collector). those meals are a picture of the kingdom of heaven on earth.

Too often over the centuries, the Western churches, catholic and protestant, (unlike the Eastern Orthodox churches) have taught us that Jesus' death saved us from God's anger at our sinfulness – he accepted punishment in our place – that too easily sounds as if Jesus saved us from God!

Stibbe argues that, by being the first human being to live his entire life in obedience to God's laws, Jesus triggered a process of healing in *us* – in *identifying totally* with our humanness even to the point of dying, he started to bring our human nature to the heights of heaven.

Through Christ, we're meant to see ourselves (and other people) not as sinful *failures unworthy* of God's love (even if other people, e.g. our parents, may have made us feel unworthy of *their* love), but as beloved adopted sons and daughters of the most high God. As St Paul writes to the Corinthians, “ ‘*I will be a father to you and you will be my sons and daughters*’, says the Lord *almighty*”. - God offers himself. It's up to us to respond.

Through Jesus, we've been saved from the need to be preoccupied with our own failure to live up to God's commandments (we shall always fail sooner or later – after all we're only human); instead, we need to learn a whole new way of relating to God – as beloved sons and daughters who are loved because of who we are, rather than because of what we do.

PART 5 (Conclusion):

Let us remember: Jesus showed love to others, not in order to be loved by his Father, but because he was/is loved by his Father (and because, like any child who is truly loved, he *identified* with his loving parent).

Jesus life shows how we could live as sons and daughters of God in our own lives. What shall we do about it?

[If you'd like an opportunity to think more about all this do consider signing up for Bishop John's new course 'Following Jesus' – the forms are on the table]

Amen †