

Third Sunday of Epiphany - 26 January 2025

Message – To whom do you need to show mercy?

Creator, Redeemer, and Giver of New Life, help us to see with your eyes, and to embrace all your children. **Amen.**

Each of the first three weeks of Advent, I asked a different question:

- How are you going to revitalise your prayer life?
- What gifts and talents would you like to make use of?
- How is lovingkindness, mercy, seen in your life?

Our active engagement with these questions will build the body of Christ, help us to create the unity in diversity that is at the heart of the way of Christ. I had a fourth question that reflects Luke's gospel's inclusivity, our reading from Corinthians, and the end of our reading from Nehemiah.

Humans excel at dividing themselves into groups. We do so in an unimaginable number of ways. Every new culture you learn about will reveal new ways in which we separate ourselves from others. We do notice the ways in which people are like us but more often we notice the ways in which people are not like us and we may even take offence when we realise that someone is not like us.

In the past this may have been a matter of survival but that is rarely the case today. St Paul is addressing this habit in the Corinthian Church. The analogy with the body was well known in Greek. It was used as an argument for why people should stop striking, the powerful and wealthy would have their lives disrupted if they didn't return to work!

Saint Paul turns the analogy around. Paul uses it against those who may see themselves as significant in the body of Christ. They are nothing without all the other parts of the body, we need one another.

The inclusion of all is addressed by Luke again and again in his gospel. In today's passage the agenda for Christ and for the church is set out. We are anointed *'to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour.'*

Those who are most on the fringes are to be drawn into God's Kingdom. This is our calling. We cannot claim to be a follower of Christ if we do not embrace this calling. The fourth question is:

- To whom do you need to extend lovingkindness, mercy, in your life?

Our habit of dividing people into like me and not like me groups means that, whether intended or not, we have some faulty preconceptions about other people.

In my sermon on the First Sunday of Christmas, I explored the need to see the world through other people's eyes. Yet, there is an assumed step before that, that we can see that other people's worldviews are not the same as ours.

This is not always easy. Each of us has a lens through which we view the world. It has taken a lifetime of experiences to build it. A lifetime of experiences that is only partially shared by any other person in the world.

At one level it is remarkable that we can communicate with one another at all. There is some degree of shared

experience and worldview, which in turn can fool us into thinking that it is all shared. It is not.

We need to meet people whom we suspect are not like us on their own territory and own terms. We are not called to draw them into our world only to give them a sight of the lovingkindness, mercy, that comes from God, that we have received to pass on to others.

Today's gospel is part of a longer pericope, the second half of which is kept for the fourth Sunday of Epiphany, which the Presentation of Christ will displace next week.

In the second part of the pericope, the people of his hometown reject Jesus and try to kill him. Their initial response is to tell others about him but then they cannot get over their amazement. He is both like them and not at all like them and they find a reason not to follow.

He's only the son of Joseph. They have made a judgement. We cannot know the part the message had to play in that. Christ's version of the prophecy was not their version, Christ had a very different view of the world.

When we engage with another, we are entering a different world. It is easy to assume that we have all the right answers, yet the image of the body is saying that we need others every bit as much as they may need us. The idea that any of us live a life truly independent of others is an illusion. Human beings and human societies are interwoven at the deepest levels possible and in ways of which we have only a limited grasp.

In God's Kingdom all are valued equally. Each one of us is an embodiment of God's Kingdom. It is unlikely that any of us

manage to value everyone equally, to show lovingkindness, justice, to all people in equal measure.

The challenge is so great that it is easy to be overwhelmed. We must each seek to find a place to start. We can start by considering what opportunities we have in our daily lives to interact with people who are different from ourselves.

For some of us the opportunities will be quite limited and we may need to consciously create opportunities. I often think that clergy are potentially terrible at this because it is so easy to spend the whole of life interacting only with people from the church or at least friendly to the church.

Yet, even clergy have neighbours and friends, some of whom, hopefully, are not Christian. My incumbent, when I was at university, suggested that a healthy balance was that for every group you were a part of at church you should be a part of a group in the community.

In this way we will find people who are simultaneously both like us and unlike us. We may even find people outside the church with whom we have far more in common than some of those within the church. Yet, if they hold the value of lovingkindness, mercy, as we hope to, it will be from a very different perspective.

Learning what drives others has the potential to help us to grow too. Their insights and commitment may well humble us and give us insights in unexpected ways.

The cathedral offers some interesting opportunities in the form of the people who find their way here, both Sunday by Sunday and during the week. We find some of those people challenging. Our goal is always to hold them in

lovingkindness, mercy, so that they may know God's love.

We are quite a mixed congregation. Though we may be a small cathedral, the title cathedral draws a wide range of people. On any Sunday there are a mixture of people who live in the parish and people from further afield, regulars and visitors, people who want to be involved and those who want to be on the fringes. We also come from increasingly diverse cultures and learning from other cultures has the potential to enrich our lives and enrich our church.

Returning to the question:

- To whom do you need to extend lovingkindness, mercy, in your life?

All of us have groups of people whom we find difficult to get along with. This may be because of our assumptions or it may simply be about practice. We need to find a way of being at ease and being ourselves while also being present with the other. We may even need another person to walk the journey with us. We are the body of Christ, none of us are called to walk alone.

And, the church is the place to practice! There are a variety of groups here and not least tea, and coffee, after the services. Please come along. These are great opportunities to learn about one another, but only if we talk to those we don't really know and we talk to them with an open heart and open mind extending them the gift of lovingkindness, mercy, God's unlimited gift to all of us.