

Trinity 19 Chapelle Achard

How do we respond to God's love? Our readings today combine to explore different aspects of this question and leave us, through our gospel, with a challenge.

In Exodus we see the children of Israel choosing to turn their backs on God, in spite of their experience of being saved from slavery in Egypt and being miraculously freed from Pharaoh's pursuing army when they walked through to freedom through the waters of the Red Sea. Moses, their leader, is not with them. He is away spending time with God receiving further instructions about how they should live and worship. Perhaps the people were too dependent on Moses, or deep down unable, or unwilling to relate to a God they could not see, even though they had experienced what He could do. So they wanted gods of their own making and were willing to part with their precious jewellery in order to make them. What about Aaron and his role? Closely associated with Moses, his mouthpiece in his dealings with Pharaoh, why does he not stop what is happening? Was he powerless or, as the second part of the reading may suggest, did he try to refocus the people's attention and worship back on the true God in suggesting the festival on the following day? We don't know but we do know that Moses, when faced with God's revelation of what the people have done and His declared intention to destroy them, intercedes on their behalf and leads God to change His mind.

How often can we, even by selecting our favourite passages of Scripture, seek to create God as we want, or think, He should be? How often can we put pressure on our leaders by asking them to do what we think is right. How often does our sin, unwitting or intentional, move God to anger and how often, by the love and grace of God does Jesus, like Moses, intercede on our behalf?

God tells us to love our neighbours as ourselves. But, if we are honest, this is not always easy, even with our Christian brothers and sisters. In our epistle Euodia and Syntyche are at odds with each other, even though they are both Paul's valued fellow workers. How hard it can sometimes be for us to live in love and harmony with people who are not like us, who have different understandings and priorities or may simply just get up our noses. God gives us a choice. We can ask Him to help us to see, understand and love and, if need

be, forgive them as He does, or distance ourselves from them and allow the disagreement to deepen and become a rift.

Rather Paul urges us to look first to God and rejoice in Him for all He has done for us in Jesus. If we look to Him and away from ourselves and the hurts we suffer, real or imagined, telling Him our needs and our concerns He will give us peace and enable us to live in the right relationship with Him and our fellow beings, concentrating on all that is good – truthful, honourable, just, pure, pleasant, commendable, excellent or worthy of praise. Living in this way is the best way to respond to His love and to know His presence. In the end it is all a matter of choice.

E. Stanley Jones, the missionary to China and India during 1930s and 40s gives a good example of how we might do this in practice. He quotes Mark 9 43-47 where Jesus says if your hand or foot or eye offends you and causes you to sin, pluck it out.

The eye sees evil, can focus on it and temptation can come in if we choose to dwell on it, the foot can lead us to approach evil and the hand can be the means by which we do it.

Temptation is common to all. Even Jesus was tempted but He did not give in to sin. His Holy Spirit can help us resist it. How? If it comes to us through the eye, then blink, shift the focus, look away and look up to Jesus.

Our gospel reading is where the challenge lies. The wedding invitations are ignored by those who receive them in the first instance. They are too busy, too self-centred to see them for what they are and take joy in them. Indeed some who are invited reject them with violence ill-treating and even murdering the messengers. Clearly a reference to the Jewish people of Jesus' time who ill-treated the prophets and, having waited for their Messiah to come for generations, fail to recognise Him now that He has finally come. But what of ourselves? The invitation to us, through our Lord Jesus Christ, is to be filled with His Holy Spirit, to give ourselves to God so that He can make us like Jesus and enable us to share the good news of the love and the forgiveness He came to bring. But we also can be too busy, too preoccupied, even sadly sometimes, with the things we do for the church, to see the invitation for what it is and respond with joy.

So the invitations go to those in the streets, the good and the bad, without discrimination, or so it would first appear. Many come to the feast but some seek to stay on their own terms. I used to find this parable difficult thinking it unfair that only one person was picked out and rejected because he had no wedding garment on. Where on earth could he have got one from? But, as you will no doubt know, the wedding garments were offered to the guests by the hosts, so the man in question had not made the effort to accept and put on the gift which he had been given. He wanted to enjoy God's party on his own terms.

How are we respond to God's love? Finally we have to receive it through Jesus Christ by faith with thanksgiving. We cannot relate to God on our own terms. He accepts us as we are, but loves us too much to leave us as we are. When we come to Christ God invites us to change. To take off our old garments of sin and self-centredness and to put on the wedding garment which is the righteousness of Christ, freely offered to all who choose to believe in Him when He died on the cross. And because we are not perfect, it needs to be a regular, repeated process. We can only do this for ourselves. We can pray for our family and friends, show and speak of God's love in Christ for them, make them aware of His invitation and show them the gift of His wedding garment. But we can't put it on for them. They have to choose to do that for themselves. Amen