

Sunday 11 August – Eleventh Sunday after Trinity – ‘The Kingdom of God is like Leaven’ – Michael Bayley

Readings:

Ephesians, 4:25-5:2. John, 6:35;41-51.

Sermon: ‘The Kingdom of God is like Leaven’- Michael Bayley

I am sure that we have all been horrified and bemused by the extraordinary violent reaction across the country following the dreadful knife attack on the young girls in Southport. How do we respond to that? What do we do about it? I’m glad to say that Bishop Pete and Bishop Sophie put out a statement which seems very sound.

“We are appalled at the utterly abhorrent scenes of violence seen in the Dearne Valley over the weekend. These actions in no way reflect the communities we are blessed to serve in the Diocese of Sheffield. Our communities are richer for the diversity they reflect. The Diocese of Sheffield stands against every form of racism, it has no place in our communities. We are working hard to ensure this is a core priority over the coming years.

We pray for all those who are fearful and have been affected by the riots. These attacks have been targeting some of the most vulnerable people in society.

Through these troubling times it has been uplifting to see the bravery of emergency services, volunteers and the public in coming together to help each other and to assist with clean-up operations. We believe it is that spirit of togetherness and fellowship which represents who we are – not the violent actions of the individuals involved in the riots...

Please continue to hold the victims of these attacks in your prayers.”

The call to prayer seems the least we can do. But is there anything we can do in conjunction with that prayer? What is it in our society which has led to this extraordinary outbreak of violence which seems so totally inappropriate and troubling? I understand that social media enables this sort of madness to spread much more quickly than was possible before but it only magnifies what is there already. What can be done to counter this extraordinary frame of mind which sees hate and violence as the right way to respond to a terrible tragedy?

There is no easy answer but I think a clue lies in the words ‘frame of mind’. How do we as a society think about these things? What assumptions do we make? It is possible to affect real change the way society as a whole consider some important issues. Slavery is perhaps the most obvious example but also how the role of women has changed radically over the past few decades, even if there is still some way to go. The change in the attitude to drink-driving is really quite marked. In all these cases, and I’m sure you can think of others, a new way of thinking percolates into society which made me think of leaven. Jesus said: ‘The kingdom of heaven is like leaven which a woman took and hid in three measures of meal until it was all leavened.’ (Matthew 13:33)

What then, especially at this time, is the leaven with which we want our society to be leavened? We had one good exposition of that in today's epistle from Ephesians. I am including some verses just before the passage we had for the epistle:

“You must be renewed in mind and spirit, and put on the new nature created in God's likeness, which shows itself in the upright and devout life called for by the truth. Then have done with falsehood and speak the truth to each other, for you belong to one another as part of one body. If you are angry, do not be led into sin; do not let the sunset find you nursing your anger; and give no foothold to the devil... Let no offensive talk pass your lips, only what is good and helpful to the occasion, so that it brings a blessing to those who hear it.... Have done with all spite and bad temper, with rage, insults, and slander, with evil of any kind. Be generous to one another, tender-hearted forgiving one another as God in Christ gave you. “(Ephesians 4:23 – 32)

I'm sure none of us have any illusions about just how hard it is to change the way we think ourselves let alone society as a whole but I suggest that the example of Josephine Butler can give us encouragement. In 1864 the government passed the Contagious Diseases Act. This was to confront the problem that soldiers in barracks and sailors in ports were consorting with prostitutes and picking up sexual infections in increasing numbers. The government and the military men were not interested in the welfare of prostitutes; their only concern was the steadily rising graph of infected soldiers and sailors. The effect of the measures (There were three Acts altogether.) was that these women could be arrested, detained and examined purely because of their sex and their 'profession', not because they had committed any offence. The examination was intrusive and frequently painful. All the police had to do was to suspect that the non-concerned was a prostitute. This was an outrageous assault on women.

Josephine Butler was utterly horrified by the way the acts worked and eventually after the 1869 Act was passed she felt compelled to work for their abolition. She was an integral part of respectable Victorian society. Her husband George was Church of England clergyman and, at the time, Principal of Liverpool College. And so it was seen as profoundly shocking that she should not only know about the horrors of the Contagious Diseases Act but should be prepared campaign about and talk about it in public. She did this tirelessly from 1869 when she founded the Ladies National Association for the Repeal of the Contagious Diseases Acts until finally after many battles and setbacks the Contagious Diseases Acts were suspended in 1883.

Josephine Butler was a devout evangelical Christian and her husband George gave her his unstinted support despite the extreme unpopularity of her campaign. She and her campaign succeeded in altering the 'frame of mind' with which parliamentarians in particular and society in general approached the contentious social issue of prostitution and the way in which a vulnerable group of women were being treated. She and the campaign she led acted as leaven within society as a whole.

Bishop Pete has three helpful suggestions to make.

1. Pray in Jesus's name, especially on Fridays as Moslems gather for Friday prayers and this coming week especially when Pakistan Day is celebrated on the 14 August and Indian independence on the 15 August.
2. Reach out in Jesus's name to those from majority world backgrounds who are feeling vulnerable at this time even if it is only sending a card or making a phone call.
3. Stay hopeful, joyful and defiant in Jesus's name, not being deterred from 'business as usual.'

In line with that, here is a prayer by Thomas More (died 1535). Note the final phrase.

Grant us, O Lord,
The royalty of inward happiness
And the serenity which comes
from living close to Thee.
Do Thou daily renew in us
The sense of Joy
so that by Thy Spirit,
We may bear about us
The infection of good courage.

(Thomas More 1478-1535)

Amen

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