

'All the world's a stage'

Trinity 1: Sunday 18 June 2017. Tixover and Barrowden.

'All the world's a stage'

'And all the men and women merely players;

They have their exits and their entrances...' says Shakespeare as he assembles his cast to play particular roles. Jesus does much the same in our gospel this morning as he calls the twelve disciples.

We have had a pantomime weekend with our guests here presenting us with comedy, reality, buffoonery and great talents for which we are very grateful. Imported talents such as this is delightful but the actors of Rutland are also emerging. They are standing on tiptoe at the start of the Shakespeare season at Tolthorpe so a thespian sermon may not be too out of place.

Drama and Reality.

Shakespeare's life revolved around the theatre. Frequently in his plays we find him using the stage as a metaphor for the whole of life. He captures most of us in one or another of his characters. The principal of my theological college – a humble monk – would much have preferred to teach theology exclusively through literature for there we find nature red in tooth and claw. Even the worst of TV Soaps - and you can't get much worse than the new *'Ackley Bridge'* series on Channel 4 – will tell us shocking tales about ourselves, in this case about the failure of multiculturalism. *'The Last Leg'* is another satirical programme which speaks the unspeakable about disability in a gloriously politically incorrect way. Of course, the drama of this Eucharist also tells a startling tale about equality, sharing, simplicity, Godly dependence and the value of history – all challenging elements to our sophisticated and independent lives here in Rutland.

In Hamlet, Shakespeare constructs a play within a play in order to expose the wicked uncle who has murdered Hamlet's father. Drama confronts us with truth, justice, prophecy. It tugs at our consciences; it raises our expectations; it motivates, purifies and re-directs.

So too, in this concentrated way, we find in the gospels a new and living way to live: to live in a power which reaches down to our lowest depths and urges us on to seek the things which are above.

Discipleship.

In our gospel today, Jesus assembles his cast: a rum lot of ordinary folk chosen precisely because they will do ordinary things extraordinarily well. We are called first to be fully human; then to be 'Christian' – to be with Christ, seeking out our particular roles in this drama of reconciliation. The action revolves around healing. Hear how St. Matthew writes the stage directions: *"Heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse lepers, cast out demons."* Now there's not much leprosy in Rutland but it has been replaced in our society by the disfigurement of dementia which needs huge support. There are also a few 'dead women walking' – and men too - who need support, friendship, care.

Jesus in these stage directions is not being prescriptive. We are to use our imaginations as we enjoy one another, care for our neighbour, exercising a bias to the poor. St Francis of Assisi told his followers to go out and preach the gospel. *'Use words if really necessary'*, he said.

Any reasonable actor will tell us that the script may be set but the way it is delivered and the actions can be variable as the players respond to the audience. This I think is a major problem for some people who would like to associate with The Church today but they just can't accept the Christian straitjacket. Well, I'm not sure I've ever seen one of those! We are not called to lose our personality! We live by grace; not by law. God gives us life, resources and intelligence to get on with the script – to live it as best we can. And in the end he will say, *"Well done, thou good and faithful servant"* (Mt. 25.23).

There are some elements of church life which we may not find attractive. But the gospel is multi-faceted. It does have its formal side – its teaching and learning – just as any actor has to learn his or her lines. It may not be this formal side which attracts you but really there is very little of that. It is merely the tip of the iceberg. The thrust of the gospel is counter-cultural and it is this side of our calling which we must not forget.

We live in turbulent times. Recent elections have favoured the anti-establishment Trump, the turbulent Corbyn and the outsider Emmanuel Macron. Even 'Trial by Jury' challenges the establishment in its gentle satirical way. Our gospel is also counter-cultural and often anti-establishment. In our role as reconcilers, people are crying out for help through the foodbank, the stroke club, the evergreens, the Samaritans: just being a good neighbour to the glory of God. This is not technical stuff for the most part. It just requires our time and our care, most of which we have in spade-loads in this Benefice. Such work for the Social Gospel is the glory of the Church of England. Hundreds of person-hours are spent doing just that up and down the country every week.

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And all the men and women merely players;

They have their exits and their entrances

And one man in his time plays many parts."

Perhaps you are called to change your part in the gospel drama. It may be that you have filled your previous role with great dignity and it is time to change. Find out what the director needs and may God give you grace to pursue it. Amen.