

Stewardship Sermon

Homeless Jesus.

Lent III. Sunday 4 March 2018. Morcott and Duddington.

The Body on the Bench

We are in New York on a bitterly cold February morning. The last few stragglers converge on St. John's Episcopal Cathedral for the Sunday Eucharist. The streets are quiet; snow is threatening; the homeless still lie underneath their blankets in doorways or on park benches, including one close to the cathedral steps.

The cathedral is warm inside and a reasonable crowd inhabit the Great Choir for an excellent sermon on the monotony of life. Afterwards we quickly looked at the art work. Geraldine was taken by a bronze taken from the rubble of 9/11. I mused on the sermon about boredom and the journey through Lent. Then out into the bright winter sunshine for something to eat. We passed again the huddled blanket on the bench but then our eyes were opened. Poking out beneath the blanket, the homeless beggar had nails through his feet! How could this be?

Then I remembered – I remembered a big fuss in the art world a few years ago surrounding a bronze of the homeless Christ on a park bench. It was created by a Canadian artist. It was provocative – in fact so challenging that it was refused by Toronto Cathedral and the Roman Catholic Cathedral in New York because appreciation 'was not unanimous'.

The artist had done his job. We had been judged by those chilling words from St. Matthew's Gospel, chapter 25: *'as you did it to one of the least of my brethren, you did it to me'* (25.40)

Broken bodies.

Why were our eyes opened at that point, when all we wanted to do was to cross the road and have a breakfast bagel? It was because we had been with Jesus. We had witnessed the breaking of the bread, the breaking of the body at The Cathedral Eucharist – such a powerful moment. In that breaking we see Christ giving his life away for us all. In the mystery of his death and resurrection, he shares his life with us all. He bids us do the same for we too are his body on earth today. We are part of the body to be poured out, shared, given away in the service of God and of humankind. Do we measure up to that challenge?

Well yes, we do, in part. Social research has shown us that Christian people are more disposed to voluntary work than others. We give thousands of hours each year to helping those in poverty – quite out of proportion to the size of the Christian community in the UK. In the face of the current austerity measures, much more of our infrastructure would collapse if it were not for the likes of Christian volunteers.

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In our villages too this network of caring is peppered if not organized by members of our congregations. In the current cold weather I have been amazed at the neighbourliness which breaks out. This is not just the Dunkirk Spirit for I know it exists in most our villages most of the time.

So we are aware of our neighbours, but Jesus asked in a parable, 'Who is my neighbour'? Is the man sleeping in a New York doorway our neighbour? Are the homeless in Stamford our neighbours or those barred from the only homeless shelter in Peterborough our neighbour? Jesus says that they are. *'If you did it to the least of these my brethren, you do it to me'*.

The Church Accounts.

In this benefice our finances are thinly spread, except when it comes to the care of our churches. Generally, we have money under the mattress for a rainy day. And that is right. Generosity begins at home but where does it end? If we had a little more money in the church account, it would give the PCC greater flexibility in our charitable giving. We could improve the heating, put in a smart toilet but that would be to think of ourselves again. Looking further afield and recognizing Christ in the needy, we could give to church missions or work with the homeless. We might even buy a house for Peterborough 'Hope in Action' which would allow them to house homeless folk.

Our giving needs attention and our priorities need re-calibrating if we are hearing the call of the homeless Christ aright. Some of our parishes give nothing away each year. That is a scandal! Our average giving throughout the benefice is about £6 per week which is exactly half the diocesan weekly average! That means that some poorer parishes in the big towns are actually subsidizing us who live in one of the most affluent post-codes in the country!

So this Lent, we need to work towards doubling our weekly giving in most of our parishes. It won't happen all at once. In my experience, the concept of generosity grows. We receive nudges to open our hearts and our wallets wider. I remember myself 30 years ago sitting next to a fellow priest who put a fiver in the collection which rather trumped my 50p. In my home village, the Reader and his family tithed their disposable income. It had a wordless effect upon that Bedfordshire village. The bronze beggar under the blanket with the pierced feet nudged us. Each of us gave money to the beggars we met on the way to our bagel breakfast that day.

This Lent gives us another nudge. We are not asking you to tithe your disposable income or even give to the church the 5% requested by The General Synod. I am asking that you move towards doubling your current weekly giving level, whatever that might be.

Do we believe in a loose-change God or a God who changes lives? Amen.