

Sunday 5th September 2021

Monkey Business. (James ch.2. 14 – 17)

Lisbon Zoo.

I recently found myself visiting Lisbon Zoo at feeding time. Not the big game, but the monkeys. They were corralled by a high wall and a moat beyond which we, the public, could walk and watch their antics. Their keeper sidled along among the public with a large basket of mixed fruit and began to throw the bananas and apples haphazardly over the moat. This soon attracted the attention of the monkeys who gathered at the water's edge to catch the various offerings. Some fell short into the water and the monkeys scooped them up with their overlarge hands while others showed their catching dexterity by plucking bananas out of the air. This was all very predictable but what I was surprised about is the calm way in which the food was distributed. There was no barging and fighting. Each of the monkeys seemed to accept that the apple belonged to his neighbour and it would be wrong to fight for it.

How did this compare to our human attitudes to shortage? I felt that it cast us in a rather poor light. We seem to fight for everything, from bargains in the January sales at Selfridges, loo rolls at the start of a lockdown to sacks of rice distributed from the back of a lorry in famine-torn Ethiopia.

But there is another more generous sense in human beings triggered by disasters. We have all been horrified by the recent scenes at Kabul Airport as people fled in fear of their lives from the Taliban. Some of those refugees are now billeted close to us in quarantine hotels. They left with nothing and are now at the mercy of our generosity. The response has been heart-warming. A collection for toiletries in one of our villages has swamped the organizer and more people are desperate to give. Is this something to do with our faith? Perhaps. But there will be many folk who have given and want to give who have no faith at all. Is there something innate in human nature which sees suffering or injustice and has to act? We may reject God but that does not deny that his creatures have a bias towards helping their neighbour. Perhaps we are moral creatures after all, closely related to the monkey when it suits us?

Altruism.

In our reading from the Letter of James, he suggests that faith must have an outlet in practical action or it is no faith at all. We find this direct link between faith and practical action in most religions but it is especially marked in Judaism and Christianity. Jesus, quoting the Old Testament in the Sermon on the Mount, sums up The Golden Rule: '*Do unto others as you would have them do unto you*' (Mt. 7.12).

Such a response to those in need is to be found throughout the ministry of Jesus and the scriptural tradition. It is on our TV screens today with the huge support for the Paralympics. The BBC has launched an experiment called The Kindness Test, the results of which will be analysed and presented next year. Already however, psychologists have found that the instigator of an act of kindness is also a beneficiary as they experience lower levels of stress, reduced blood pressure and other positive hormonal activity.

Be Generous!

Perhaps James' letter is not just a shallow encouragement to care for one another more effectively. Luther called it 'an epistle of straw' as it contained little theological fibre but maybe he underestimated that natural inclination to do good as God-given which finds expression among people of all religions and none.

Our capacity to give will be tested very soon as Afghan refugees – who left Kabul with nothing but trauma – will soon be living on our doorstep. It is not yet clear what their needs will be. Council officials are currently working on the process. But when we know what is being asked, I'm sure we will be ready to respond generously, as our faith dictates. Amen.