**Sermon Trinity 6 19/7/20 Rev. Sarah**

I wonder if you have accepted my challenge to write a Collect? I’ve explained on the pewsheet that a Collect is a short, structured prayer which ‘collects’ our thoughts around a particular issue or request. Often they sum up the theme for a service and can be a good starting point if it all seems a bit unclear!

One of the things I find interesting in Collects and other prayers is the ways in which people address God. Looking back through the intercessions I have written, I often begin with ‘Almighty God’. Others might consider God’s compassion or generosity. I wonder what you might think if someone started by saying ‘God of judgement and fire, take pity on us snivelling wretches’? How we think about God is important. This is after all the God we worship. Of course, God will always be beyond our understanding, but that shouldn’t stop us putting in the effort and taking the nature of God seriously.

I’ve been reading a book by the theologian Miroslav Volf. He’s a Croatian who has lived through political oppression, economic deprivation and personal tragedy. Volf states that people ‘worship idols without even knowing it…they dwell in their worshippers’ mind and are made of the soft stuff of their own cherished ideas’. They ‘simply assume that who they believe God to be and who God truly is are one and the same. God is as large or as small as they make the infinite one to be and none of the beliefs they entertain about God could possibly be wrong’. This book explores the giving and forgiving nature of God and the implications of this for us as people as faith.

Volf argues that there are two images of God which are held firmly within Western Christianity: that of God the Santa Claus and God the Negotiator. God the Santa Claus provides everything we ask for like an over-indulgent parent and God the negotiator requires us to make deals in order to receive God’s favour.

On the face of it both of these ideas feature in the parable this morning. The seed is provided with abundant generosity and it grows to a tremendous harvest. It appears that the workers have done nothing except receive this gift. Once things start to go wrong and the weeds appear, they start to negotiate: Shall we pull out the weeds? How do we gain your blessing? Interestingly, Volf is not saying that these ideas about God are without any truth. Clearly we are receivers of God’s blessing and there are also instances in the Bible where people negotiate with God and appear to be rewarded for it. What Volf is arguing is that we must not allow ourselves to hold onto a restricted view of God so tightly that we reject a broader and richer understanding. Yet at the end of today’s parable, this seems to lead us to a God of judgement. This is a sobering thought, although hope shines through. Every child on the playground understands the need for honesty and fairness. The lines of justice and accountability will be drawn in holiness and love. Those who have inflicted appalling cruelty and suffering on others will be held to account. The challenge is that we are not so far removed from those behaviours ourselves as we might like to pretend. We too will be held to account.

So, by considering a fuller picture of the nature of God, we are opened up to considering aspects which seem more challenging, yet we also draw closer to the glorious truth of the Gospel message. We recognise that we are not better than other people, far from it! The message is not that by attending church, using the ‘right’ words or by doing good works, will we somehow wheedle our way into heaven. Our salvation comes through faith in Christ who restores our relationship with God the Father.

Our challenge is to grow deeper in this relationship, and to share this unending and undeserved love with others, granting them the freedom to encounter the wonder of God for themselves.

**Spiritual Exercises – The Examen**

The examen is a prayerful reflection from the Spiritual Exercises of St Ignatius Loyola. It consists of setting time aside each day to reflect prayerfully on the events of the day and where God has been in those events.

The examen is an exercise in the practice of **attentiveness** to my lived experience and also in the art of **discernment** - becoming aware of the ways in which God is active in my life and resolving to co-operate better with his gifts and calling.

There are five steps to the examen as it appears in the Spiritual Exercises:

**1 Give thanks**
Spend a few moments in gratitude for the gifts and blessings of the day.

**2 Ask for light**
Ask God to enlighten you, showing where he has been at work and present in your day through events, people and places.

**3 Examine the day**
Review the moments of the day, noticing what has led to consolation and what has led to desolation and my reactions to these events, people and places.

**4 Seek forgiveness**
Ask God's forgiveness for the times when you have acted, spoken or thought contrary to his grace and calling for you.

**5 Resolve to change**
Decide what in your behaviour or attitude you will try to improve tomorrow.

The examen might take 10 to 15 minutes to complete but can also be done in a much shorter time. (jesuitinstitute.org)