

Sermon Ordinary Sunday 27 Year A 2017

Most of us can put our hand up to one phobia or another. Fear of spiders, snakes and heights tops the list for most people. But we would also know of other fears: of enclosed spaces, of open spaces, of mess, of children, of... practically anything.... The psychology of it all is quite complex and quite perplexing: what fails to even stir one person can be a paralysing obsession in another. There are more subtle fears we face in life too, that can be equally life-defining: the fear of death, of dying alone, the fear of environmental catastrophe, the fear of failure, or of being forgotten.

But one of the most powerful is the fear of *rejection*. As a tiny baby we screamed, shrieked, and cried if we were not held, cuddled, and loved by our parents. As a child we craved to play with playmates and were miserable if they didn't. The phenomenon of teenage bullying apparently rife in our schools in large measure reflecting the pain and fear of rejection. We could think too of the horrible experience of rejection when a parent is confronted by a son or daughter who is on drugs or alcohol. Despite the unconditional love the parents have shown, their patience, their hope, to have it all thrown back in their face – rejected – time and time again. It's heart breaking.

The church now wakes up to a kind of rejection. It too has proved hurtful, disappointing and confusing. As we know, most modern, western, liberal democracies have rejected the church, its faith, its heritage, its ethical framework. The results of this rejection are now bearing fruit. It is not an exaggeration to say that this rejection in many respects seems like a death wish to our culture. Reject the faith, reject too the foundations of our culture, and the best and most noble and most beautiful achievements in western thought, art, music. Universities today and intellectual elite appear to delight in this! But those who have argued we need reject all this have largely failed to produce a lasting, substantial alternative.

The horrors that unfolded in Las Vegas this past week reveals to us the distressing face of what the rejection of all that is good, true and beautiful looks like. In 'The Brothers Karamazov' Dostoevsky has his character Ivan say, 'If God is dead, all things are permissible.' We have seen the chilling realisation of that. In Stephen Paddock – the Las Vegas gunman – the conscience was dead. A dead soul, moral nihilist, a post-Christian man in a post-Christian world, a monster. Such are the results of a rejection – the expulsion - of God from our lives.

Now, the experience of rejection can lead us to respond in one of two ways. The first is that we do all we can do to seek and keep approval. We keep our heads down and our mouths shut. We remain silent in the face of wrong and injustice. We seek to blend into the crowd and remain, by and large, anonymous. If we are like everyone else then we won't be too different to be picked off and discarded. Students hear much at school about peer pressure. And this is part of it. The desire *to be popular* in many ways is simply the desire *to be the same* as everyone else. We do this in our personal lives. And we've been doing this as a church as well. In many parts of the church we've given up what's distinct in order to be accepted.

The other direction we can head, when rejection does hit, is to withdraw, to isolate oneself, to close up and retreat. This is understandable, because rejection hurts! But this withdrawal not necessarily brings us quietness and peace. Instead it can be the place of festering jealousies and envy. Cut off from the moderating presence of others, it can be where hatreds and violence can grow. It's the Miss Haversham phenomenon: jilted at the altar, she lives the rest of her days closed up in her fraying wedding dress and in her decaying mansion; her heart becoming more and more closed as she seeks to unleash her bitter revenge on the world.

Even as we are mindful of the rejection we experience - and how we reject others - as people of faith we are also called to be mindful of our rejection of God. The parable we encounter today is placed just after Jesus' Palm Sunday entry into Jerusalem. Even as the crowds acclaim Jesus is also aware how others reject him. The parable we hear today, then, is told to us in the shadow of the Cross, the ultimate sign of humankind's rejection of its Creator.

When we look at the Cross and understand its profound message we see *our* rejection of God's love for us. The cross will make no sense to us unless we can see ourselves as part of the picture. And that's why there's a human body hanging on it. It's not an empty cross, it's a cross loaded to the full with rejection, the worst kind of pain that any of us can ever experience.

The crucifix presents us with God nailed and immobilized because we won't listen to him! For those who have experienced it personally we know there's no defence against rejection. No words can deal with rejection. There's nothing we can do against it - which is perhaps why Jesus stood before Pontius Pilate - the personification of human judgment and rejection - and stood there in utter silence. Words simply cannot deal with the reality of rejection.

But the parable put to us in the Gospel today is more than just a parable about us. It is, rather, a glimpse into God's heart. It tells us about how God feels, about the hurt and pain He experiences at our hands. But the good news of God in Jesus Christ is that God doesn't reject us! God takes us as we are, accepts us as we are. All that we throw at God, God can take! There is no limit to God's capacity to transform and heal and forgive. We might reject God. But guess what? He doesn't reject us!! God knows, by his own experience of suffering and death of his son, the depth of our human experience. God knows rejection. The threat of rejection did not see Jesus keep his head down or his mouth shut. He knew what awaited him and continued to speak truth to power. Even if it makes us unpopular or the object of ridicule and misunderstanding, let us keep this in mind. Nor did the experience see him retreat in isolation or fear. Instead he allowed it to be the springboard of his saving love and mercy.

Looking to our Lord, when others reject us, whether personally or as a church let us just keep on loving. When family members reject the faith we hold dear - just keep loving them. When our culture and society reject us - just keep loving them. Don't despise it or despair of it! We guard the faith and treasure it just waiting for the time to share it once more. And in this model of patient loving we will surely reveal the heart of the Father, who is so patient, merciful and loving toward us. Amen.