

Sermon Matthew 16:13-20 11th Sunday after Trinity 2020 St Martin's

Preacher: Reverend Elizabeth Horwell

Jesus' encounter with Peter in today's gospel reading is a real crunch point encounter in their time together and for the first time Jesus really lays it on the line what Peter's role will be going forward. Perhaps most significant is the bit towards the end where Jesus says:

"I will give you the keys of the kingdom and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven."

And that seems to me an awful responsibility: to decide whether or not to forgive each person as Peter judges best! Heavens – how could you be sure you'd always make the right decision?

Well maybe Jesus gives him this responsibility because Peter has just admitted he knows that Jesus is the Messiah; and Jesus tells him he couldn't recognise this unless God himself had shown Peter the truth. So it must mean that God is very close to Peter and will guide him in this massive task. But still! To be completely responsible for all these judgments - is surely very daunting.

Now we all do make judgments – and if you're anything like me, you'll realise that you're actually making judgments - in your head at least – lots of the time. Whenever you compare different things, you're effectively passing judgment; not always about whether to forgive or not, of course, but certainly about which you rank best or worst.

I don't know about you but I **catch myself** sometimes comparing things/ people/situations and I don't even realise I'm doing it half the time, it's so subconscious, so hard-wired into my thinking processes.

And I catch myself doing it to judge people too – whether they're right or wrong about something. I used to get very stressed, for instance, watching Question Time because I'd have very clear ideas about which 'side' was right and I really didn't want to hear any of the arguments put forward by the other side. So not just judging but negative judgment: criticising rather than being open to discussion. And there are always many things in life, particularly in the political arena, where we're expected to assess things in a very dualistic way; to see only black and white; right or wrong; good or bad.

In our own lives, too, if we're aware of our thought processes, we'll no doubt see where we judge others based on our own prejudices – shameful as they may be! I'll share with you one of mine that I'm not proud of!! I like to give money to people selling Big Issue and when I first arrived in Wanstead as a raw curate thirteen years ago I got to know Nina, a Romanian lady who sold Big Issue every day on the High Street. And as I got to know her, I discovered that she lived with her mum-in-law locally and first she had one child, then two and then three. I lost count after that. Nina is still there, 13 years on, selling Big Issue on the High Street. And after several years, I started to think very critically of her. Why didn't she

get a proper job – surely she'd been in England long enough? Why was she even allowed to sell Big Issue if she actually had a place to live?

These thoughts say more about my prejudices, my lack of grace, than they say about Nina. And these prejudices remind me of Jane's TV commercial example last week where the skinhead was seen running towards and knocking over an old man so many would criticise him as a typical young job when, if they'd seen the bigger picture, they'd have realised that he was actually trying to save the man from falling rubble which would probably have killed him had the skinhead not pushed him out of the way.

And that's just it when it comes to judgment – we make our decisions – black or white, good or bad, right or wrong - by making assumptions about all sorts of things, which say more about our own prejudices than about the other person.

And that's why I think the responsibility Jesus gives Peter is such a tough thing. At minimum it requires an ability not to simply take things as they seem and a willingness to show grace and mercy and compassion and to give each person the benefit of the doubt.

Luckily Jesus asks the rest of us NOT to Judge – He only gives Peter that responsibility. Sadly, I suspect, that won't stop us having opinions of others. But one of the things I've learnt in recent years is that actually most things in this world are not black and white; but rather very complex. As are most people. And all of us, if we were to be judged for our mistakes rather than our attempts to do right, would be found wanting... So somehow when we see someone else who we think is bad or evil, we need to remind ourselves that God is in them too, and that if God is in them, then whatever we see in them that we don't like is not the whole picture, cannot be the whole picture. And we need to hold off on judging them and pray for them instead ... however much that grates on us.

I find this work of trying not to judge others harshly very humbling as I begin to acknowledge my prejudices - but I know that this is life-long work for me if I want to draw closer to God. And what's interesting is that as we begin to recognise our own sinfulness and mistakes, we start to feel so much more compassion for others who get it wrong.

Forgiveness is so central for Jesus that he includes it in the prayer that he taught his disciples, the prayer we say every week in every service:

Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us.

And so, I pray today: Lord help us to really mean these words when we say them. Help us to have compassion for others if we have to judge at all. Give us the grace and love for others that you show to us. Amen