

Sermon – Sunday 30th September 2018 – 9.30 am

I have had very mixed experiences with wedding photographers. I took a lot of weddings in my curacy, and it was always the question of photography that I came to dread. It felt like I could never get it right. On one occasion I remember walking into the choir vestry to dismiss the choir, and one of the tenors commented, “the photographer was rather intrusive, wasn’t he?!” And inside I felt let down, because I had had a very congenial conversation with said photographer, who had assured me that he would stay in the side aisles and the shutter was almost silent. Yet throughout the wedding he had been flitting here and there, taking hundreds of photographs even in the quietest parts of the service.

Of course you can imagine that at the next wedding, I approached the photographer far more sternly, making my expectations known in my best school teacher fashion. And then I had to face my own sense of guilt not only at the slight look of horror on their face at my attitude, but then when during the wedding they were utterly discreet and unobtrusive. In wedding photographers I feel like I have experienced the whole gamut, from someone who was furious that I wouldn’t allow him to be right in the middle, photographing the moment that the rings went on the fingers through to those who have remained quietly at the back of the church throughout the service.

You see the problem is that wedding photographers, like the rest of us, are individuals. The moment I found myself tarring every photographer with the same brush, assuming that they would all have the same attitude, it went wrong. And even worse than that, I am only human, too. After five weddings here at St. Mary’s I am delighted to report that I have had very positive experiences with wedding photographers. Some of which will be down to them, and some of which is probably the result of me having more experience, too.

If wedding photographers are individuals and need to be approached as such, the same must also be true for the rest of us. I wonder how it is that you hear Jesus’s words in today’s gospel reading? There is no doubt that his message is not an easy one to hear. There is urgency and indeed violence in the injunction to dismember ourselves if we find that our hands, feet or eyes cause us to stumble. And each of us will hear those words in different ways. Perhaps you’re already wringing your hands slightly, wondering what it is that you might be doing wrong, and how you are stumbling. Or you might even have it in your mind who you think these words really apply to.

We do need to be careful, though, about how we hear Jesus’s words. In some of what he said he was addressing great multitudes; sometimes he was particularly keen to address the pharisees; and sometimes he was talking to smaller groups. The words in this morning’s reading were addressed to his disciples, to the twelve, his closest friends, the ones he knew well and who knew him well, too. And so he uses strong language and powerful images when he addresses them, to make them think. It’s not that they don’t apply to us – much of what we are about is discipleship, so Jesus’s words to his first disciples are undoubtedly important. But the context is important, too.

One of the challenges of the lectionary is that there can be an arbitrariness about where the readings begin and end. For those of you with especially good memories, last week’s gospel reading ended with Jesus taking a little child in his arms and saying: ‘Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me.’ Now, with baptisms last Sunday, I wasn’t complaining that these words appeared in last week’s reading. But we need to remember that everything said by Jesus in today’s reading is set in this context. The

little child is still in his arms. Hold that image for a moment, of Jesus holding a little child as he says these hard-to-hear words, because it really is important.

In today's reading Jesus is dealing with a specific issue. His disciples, those closest to him, are trying to be faithful followers, and they have come across a problem. They have spent a lot of time with Jesus, they think they understand his teaching, at least up to a point. They have been called by him and given their mission, to heal and cast out demons in his name. But now they have come up against a problem. Someone else, not a recognised follower of Jesus, is casting out demons in his name, and that can't be right, can it?

Remember again, last week the disciples were arguing about which one of them was the greatest. Well one thing's for sure in all of their minds. All of them must be greater than this upstart who's casting out demons but isn't even a known follower.

And it is in this context that Jesus continues with the message that he began last week. Why are you arguing about which of you is the greatest? That is not the way it should be among my followers. 'Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all.' And yes, that extends beyond the twelve. If someone is casting out demons in my name, he cannot be against us. So you mustn't put yourselves above him.

What Jesus was saying to his earliest followers is true for us, too. We none of us experience our faith in exactly the same way; God is beyond each one of us to understand – we each possess a part of the picture which helps us to live out our discipleship, albeit falteringly at times. And what Jesus is urging his disciples to do – with strong words, but perhaps gently spoken as he holds the child upon his knee – is to look to themselves and their own stumbling blocks.

I think there is another significance to the little child, too. Because for some of us it is important to remember the little child inside ourselves. These words of Jesus are to his disciples, remember, and he loves them unconditionally. Just as he loves the little child. And he reminds us that whatever we do, we are not to allow *our* stumbling blocks to become stumbling blocks for those who are trying to discover that love for themselves.

For some of us, the stumbling blocks will actually be inside ourselves, doing damage to ourselves, and which then risk overspilling to other people as well. And in that case Jesus's words are particularly poignant. Even here, in the context of church, it is so easy to feel like we aren't good enough. And that feeling is as much of a stumbling block as any other. It is perhaps something which afflicts the church more now than ever. Most of us have known times when churches have been fuller, and it is easy to feel as though we must be doing something wrong.

Which is when we need to remove the stumbling block and remember that every Friday we welcome children to toddler group; that last Sunday we welcomed two families for baptism; that weekly and monthly we welcome all kinds of people to different groups. That there are individuals here who clean and maintain the buildings; tend the grounds; make refreshments; raise funds; organise social activities; serve during services; write prayers and give readings; clean the silver. I could go on.

There are times when we all need to be challenged. But please, let's remember the context in which we are challenged. It is a context of unconditional love, recognising the little child in each one of us, and longing for each one of us to know that love.

Amen