

Sermon – Sunday 17th February 2019 – 9.30 am

Last month I went to the theatre. I haven't been for many years, and I discovered something extraordinary. Did you know that there are seats where you can actually see the whole stage? I was close enough that I could actually see everything that was happening on the stage, which was like a miracle to me. Up until that point, I think I had always taken it for granted that the stage was a very long way away; that it was somewhere all the way down there; and sometimes it was a little bit hard to see because of the pillar in the way.

Now I have wonderful memories of those infrequent trips to the theatre as a child, and it really never crossed my mind to question why we always had to climb a lot of steps to find our seats; or why the action seemed to far away. And no matter where you sit in the theatre there can be a great deal of camaraderie – having to move to let each other through, and just the excitement of a performance.

But we all know that there is a reason why some people can see the whole stage and others can't – and it's to do with the amount of money they've paid for a ticket. If we take it a step further, there have been times throughout history when people have gone to concerts and the theatre as much to be seen as to see the performance. Just think of the way the theatres are designed. Those sitting in the boxes are highly visible.

Our gospel reading this morning is reminiscent of Jesus's sermon on the mount in Matthew's gospel. It is here that he makes those counter-cultural claims about those who are blessed. Yet there is a significant difference. There is no mountain. This sermon is delivered on a level place.

For Matthew, writing most specifically for a Jewish community, and seeking to demonstrate that Jesus was the new Moses, it was important to place Jesus on a mountain. After all, a mountain is where we find God. But Luke wanted to show something different. Like Matthew, he is clear about Jesus's divinity – he talks about power coming out of him and healing those who were ill. But the concept of a level place is important to Luke. In fact, if you noticed, he actually says that Jesus was looking up to his disciples when he spoke to them.

I wonder why the level place is so important to Luke? This sense of radical equality. And I wonder, too, about its consequences – and indeed about its message for each of us.

My theatre example led me on to consider all those other places where there are signs of status, wealth and position. First class carriages on trains – and first class seats on aeroplanes. I love that moment after you've taken off when the curtains are politely closed to separate one group from another. I remember a Headteacher explaining to me his disdain for elitest parking policies – if there were enough spaces for everyone, he would take his chances with the rest of the staff. Royal Ascot is hierarchy itself – with different enclosures accessible, or not, to the different ticket holders.

Don't worry, I'm aware that the church hasn't always covered itself with glory. Some of the pews in Weybridge still bore the word "free" as a reminder that there were times that people paid to have the front pews, and indeed to arrive at the last moment as a sign of their importance. And of course I am preaching to you from a high place. There's a practical reason for that – it means you can all see me, which hopefully makes it easier to listen. But we ignore the sense of status that it can imply at our peril.

So why the level place? Luke's gospel is all about radical equality. And we must remember that he was writing in a far more hierarchical culture than our own. It is Luke who put the words of the Magnificat in to the mouth of Mary, a woman. Who told the birth narratives from the perspectives of Mary and Elizabeth. Luke the storyteller, who elevates the despised Samaritan because he was the one who noticed the man at the side of the road who had been robbed and left for dead; who tells us of a father's love and generosity when his errant son has spent all his inheritance and returned home penniless.

If we focus our lives on achieving those things that will bring status, we will always be uncomfortable in the presence of Luke. He will always be encouraging us to look beyond; to look deeper; to see as God sees.

But I think that Luke is signalling more through his focus on the level place. I have already mentioned that there is a reason why I stand in a pulpit. And in fact if we are to picture in our minds Jesus giving a sermon, it is helpful for him to be on a mountain, elevated so that people can see him more clearly. Back to the theatre, there is a careful arrangement of the seating to ensure that the maximum possible people get some kind of a view.

A level place, then, can be uncomfortable and confusing. It equalises us, yes, but it also means that none of us can really see clearly. There can be nothing more lonely than being in a crowd of people, because we don't know where to find someone we know. In the level place, no one voice has precedence over any other. We can find it difficult to know who to listen to, or who to follow.

And I wonder whether Luke is trying to remind us of that kind of confusion because it makes us ask questions and listen better.

The problem with hierarchies – apart from the fact that they suggest a distinction between people that simply isn't there – is that they can be beguiling and encourage us to take someone's wisdom and authority for granted. But we all know that the wisest words often come from children. And the deepest insights often come from those who have experienced great hardship.

We all need to see clearly, but sometimes the very structures that are supposed to help that happen leave us seeing the wrong things and listening to the wrong people. By placing his sermon on a level place, Luke reminds us to keep our eyes and ears open wherever we are. Not to be beguiled by wealth and status. But to seek God's kingdom at all times, in all places, and among all kinds of individuals. To seek to see each individual as God does.

Amen