

Psalm 119:17-32  
1 Corinthians 4:1-7  
Luke 18: 9-14

*Hold your beliefs lightly*

One feature of lockdown which has built a certain kind of community is that lots of us have been watching the same things on television. You may have seen the moving drama 'It's a Sin' in recent weeks. It tells a story both heart-breaking and heart-warming, following a group of 5 young people in the 1980s who become friends and flatmates in the heady excitement of that time, discovering themselves and their sexuality with joy and honesty and exuberance. As they begin to grow up and fall in love with the world, the world begins to fall apart: the AIDs crisis tears through their lives and the lives of their friends.

I'll try not to spoil the story for you. But I want to mention one moment in particular. One of the lead characters, Richie, has contracted the virus and is deeply ill. His parents live a determinedly cloistered life on the Isle of White; they have tolerated his decision to drop a career in law for a career as an actor, though they have made their disapproval all too clear. And they don't know that their son is gay; Richie has never been able to tell them. Their care for him has been expressed as a stubborn wish for him to be someone other than who he is. Without warning they turn up in London and find him in hospital, and they can no longer avoid the reality that is in front of them: that their son is gay; that he is ill; that they have not been beside him as parents might be. And Richie's mother explodes: she marches around the hospital blaming anyone and everyone for concealing the truth from her, nurses and strangers. She saves the full heat of her anger for Richie's housemate and best friend, Jill: how dare Jill have kept this from her? How could she have been so lied to? It is painful to watch. In her hurt, in her grief, Richie's mother is looking for someone – anyone – to blame, anyone but herself. Only another mother of another dying son can tell her the truth in the hospital tearoom: there's no one to blame but herself. If she didn't see her son for who he was in time to be there for him, it was because she refused to see what was in front of her, because she did not want to see it.

After our service today we're going to be thinking together about prejudice, and so I have chosen readings to help begin that thinking and praying with scripture and with our relationship with God. Prejudice is a difficult idea, I think, and I tell this story about Richie and his mother to try to flesh out what I think the concept means. It's one of those words that seems to speak for itself: prejudice is pre-judgment; to make up our minds about someone before we've met them. But to some extent this is natural. We all have ideas about how things are, our working assumptions if you like, which help us to get on each day. We have ideas about how a young person might behave compared with, say, an old person: a perfectly innocent and even useful kind of pre-judgment. Prejudice becomes harmful when we refuse to alter our judgments in light of new evidence, and when we simply refuse to be open to new information. Richie's mother had ideas about what a good life for her son would look like – based on her own experience, perhaps, and the expectations of the day. But these became a kind of prejudice and a kind of poison for her when she refused to adjust them in the light of new information: she simply refused to see that her son was actually flourishing, and refused to ask why - because she knew the answer would not fit with her prejudices about what flourishing could be.

I think this kind of prejudice - being committed to fixed ideas about how things should be, how lives should be shaped - is particularly a risk for us in churches. As searching, seeking people, we have found ourselves here trying to follow Jesus because we want to do right. As our psalm says, 'my soul is consumed with longing for your ordinances'!! People of faith tend to be people trying

hard to do the right thing. There's a great risk, though, that once we've judged what seems right, we can be reluctant to revise that judgment in the light of new information. We can become stuck in our prejudices. We can find ourselves thinking that Christian lives have to look a certain way, that human flourishing will look a certain way. Or we might make judgements about who deserves what, who has earned material comfort and who should still be working for it, or what gender looks like and how people should define themselves. We have ideas about what a Christian leader should look like, how they should speak. Some of these ideas are so deeply formed in us that we can't even see them ourselves. But we need to do our utmost to be conscious of them. To be always asking ourselves: maybe I've got that wrong? Maybe there's new information? Maybe I don't know as much about this other person as I thought I did?

In our first reading Paul tells the Corinthians, who were obviously struggling with this kind of thing just as we are, that we should as much as we can leave all the judging to God. Be it judging people as good or bad, or be it a matter of judging ourselves or judging others, Paul tells us: we simply do not know enough. There is always new information out there. Only God will bring to light the things now hidden and disclose the purposes of the heart. So hold your beliefs lightly, says Paul.

In our second reading, Jesus tells us a story of two people in different relationships with God. The Pharisee, trying so hard to cling to God's decrees, ends up pushing down on other people to try to get close to God. Prejudice often works like this; it is so often rooted in our discomfort with bits of ourselves - those shadowy things in us that we're not proud of, and which we find easier to project onto other people. Maybe this religious man hates that laziness in himself which wants the easy life, the something for nothing, the freeloading instinct which he has worked so hard to bury - and so he projects this onto other people, the thieves and the rogues, and pushes down on them. He hates the thought of himself as corrupt and needy, so he sets himself up over-against the corrupt and needy tax collector in the corner. What Jesus's life and teaching tells us, however, is that whenever we are pushing down on someone to get closer to God, we find that God is in fact with exactly that person. Jesus's passion and death is the epitome of this logic. A whole system pushed down on him, cast him out and made him the embodiment of everything they could not stand about themselves - only to find in the light of the resurrection that God was in fact there with the broken body of the ultimate victim of our prejudice.

To be a Christian is to put Jesus, the crucified victim, at the centre of things. It is therefore to put victims of prejudice - be that prejudice of sexuality, gender, race, poverty or disability - at the centre of things. To put them truly at the centre means not to pre-judge what is and isn't a reasonable request, what is and isn't necessary for their flourishing. It means to listen to them, as we listen to Jesus. To their perspectives, their hurts, their hopes for being fully themselves. It means being open to them changing your mind.

Both our readings, the parable and Paul's letter, show us the way forward. And it's good news, it's liberating, it's a weight lifted. We do not have to do the judging for ourselves; we can leave this to God. Instead we begin by acknowledging that we ourselves depend on God's grace. That whatever we have, we have been given. That we are acceptable to God: not only our best bits, but all our shadowy bits. And on this basis, we can try again to see others as likewise beloved by God: ready to be surprised, open to new information, holding our beliefs lightly.