

16th Sunday after Trinity

Exodus 18: 13-26 and Matthew 7: 1-14

Mother Emma

This month, clergy around the Diocese are being asked to complete their two-yearly Ministerial Development Review, reflecting on their strengths and weaknesses, their successes and failures and their own spirituality, and asking specific individuals around the parish and their staff team to provide feedback. Some have been surprised to hear that people “of the cloth” have to do something which sounds so very mundane, and there are clergy who complain of excessive “managerialism” in the Church of England today. Yet it is an excellent exercise, and one which people in many walks of life also have to undertake in their business or professional lives.

Having read the comments of my assessors along the lines of “should do more delegating”, I noticed, as so often, the aptness of today’s story of Jethro, Moses’ father-in-law, when he came to visit Moses and the people of Israel in the wilderness. Perhaps none of my assessors actually wrote, *“The thing that thou doest is not good. Thou will surely wear away, both thou, and this people that is with thee”, but in some cases, they were not a million miles from doing so*”. They, like Jethro, and like the Grow course we are currently doing as a parish team, recommended the increased sharing out of the church’s many ministries, not only between the clergy team, but between the many wonderful and able staff and volunteers we are fortunate to have in this parish. Watch this space!

Moses’ father-in-law was in fact performing a de facto Ministerial Development Review, looking from the outside and seeing what could be done better, and offering his wise opinion. The Bible is full of wisdom at all levels, and in my view, it is a mistake to suggest that modern practice, the fruit of many years of research, is at some way at odds with the kind of ancient wisdom we find within its pages. Moses’ teaching, the many messages which he received directly from God for the people of Israel, and those which came from others around him, provided a stable framework within which the people, wandering in the wilderness, could both honour God and one another.

Our second reading from St Matthew’s Gospel, comes from the chapters known as “the Sermon on the Mount”. Many have drawn parallels between Jesus’ teaching, imparted from a mountain top, and the messages received by Moses from Mount Sinai, yet the difference generally suggested is that Jesus’ teaching goes further – it speaks of what goes on in the individual’s heart, as well as in the social and ritual actions of the community. The different thoughts included in our reading may seem a bit piecemeal, but in fact they can be drawn together in three points.

Firstly, as we live together as God’s people, we are to remember it is not our place to condemn one another’s thoughts and actions – it is God who judges, and at the last day, everyone will be judged, including us.

Second, we must avoid the trap of hypocrisy. It is very easy to see, to mock or to criticise those in public life today who do not practise what they preach. Yes, they should be held to account when they attack others for attitudes, actions or statements which are patently reflected in the way they live themselves, or the things they profess to believe. But are we confident that we live out the faith

which we proclaim here, Sunday by Sunday, in our day-to-day lives? In our confession, we remember the things we have done wrong, recognising that *“there is no health in us”*, and we pray that, *“we may hereafter live a godly, righteous and sober life, to the glory of God’s holy name.”*

As we leave church, are these words ringing in our ears, or are we immediately tempted to start to condemn others, and to point out their apparently greater faults, or to shift blame for our own actions onto them? Jesus is appealing to his people to live lives of integrity. Yet, his next words are words of comfort: *“Ask, and it shall be given you; seek and ye shall find; knock and the door shall be opened unto you.”*

He draws the comparison with a father whose child asks for food, and is given it, with the love of our heavenly Father, who cares for each one of us and provides us with love and blessings. We can live in the knowledge of God’s love for us, and so live in a way which honours him. And Jesus’ final point is a summary of how to do this. *“All things, whatever ye would that men should do to you, do ye even so to them.”*

Deep in our hearts, we can recognise the way in which God wishes us to act, simply because, deep down, we know how we wish others would treat us. If we open up our hearts in honesty and vulnerability, every human soul will recognise that they long for love, for respect, for friendship and generosity, for justice, for peace and tranquillity, for others to be honest and fair with us. We may be distracted by the temptations of the world, of money and success and grandeur, but it is the way in which others treat us which can make the biggest difference.

Some of you, like me, may have grown up with Charles Kingsley’s tale of *“The Water Babies”*, and those two characters entitled, *“Mrs Doasyouwouldbedoneby”* and *“Mrs Bedonebyasyoudid”*. Mrs Bedonebyasyoudid is an ugly and terrifying character who comes to mete out to wrongdoers whatever they have done to others. Her sister, by contrast, Mrs Doasyouwouldbedoneby, is soft and beautiful and kind, and treats everyone in the manner they would like to be treated. The moral is, of course, that the world would be a better and a kinder place if everyone were to follow the instruction: *“Love your neighbour as yourself.”*

There is little doubt that Kingsley drew these images from the passage we study today. Every rule, every law, every moral teaching stems from the words *“Doasyouwouldbedoneby”*. The Bible’s wisdom shows us God’s will for us.

May we today go out inspired to demonstrate our faith in Christ as we do as we would be done by.

Amen