

Sermon for Mattins on the Third Sunday after Trinity

17th June 2018

Deuteronomy 10:12-11:1, Acts 23:12-35

Aunt Lucy, Paddington Bear's Aunt Lucy, that is, in 'Paddington 2', told the little bear to 'Be kind and polite and the world will be all right'.

It has somewhat the same flavour as

*And now, Israel, what doth the Lord thy God require of thee, but to fear the Lord thy God, to walk in all his ways, and to love him, and to serve the Lord thy God with all thy heart and with all thy soul,
To keep the commandments of the Lord, and his statutes, which I command thee this day for thy good?*

- which is from our first lesson today, from the Book of Deuteronomy, the Second Law Book of the Jewish Law, God's law, as it was given to Moses.

You might wonder what Paddington's got to do with anything: certainly, what Paddington might have to do with a Sunday sermon.

Well, the reason I'm mentioning Paddington Bear is that the second Paddington film, Paddington 2, has just been shown, last Thursday, at 'Spiritual Cinema', which I run at St Andrew's in Cobham - and to which everyone is welcome, not just St Andrew's people. There are regular Spiritual Cinema-goers from all the churches round us, and certainly there are St Mary's people in the audiences.

'What a funny choice, 'Paddington 2', for a 'spiritual' film', somebody said. 'Isn't it just a kids' film?' Well, it is a 'PG', so I think under-12s need their parents' permission to go. But it is a jolly good film for all the family, of all ages.

The thing is, though, that, when you look at it in a certain way, 'Paddington 2' is more than just a nice story for kids. On Thursday the session was led, not by me, but by Mother Kathryn Twining, whom a lot of you will remember when she's been to take services here. She has been completing an academic project, and is now looking for a parish to have her as their vicar. Meanwhile we're very lucky to have her insight and spiritual perspective.

Mother Kathryn showed us that 'Paddington 2' isn't just a story for kids. I won't spoil the plot by telling you what happens, but suffice to say that Paddington is kind and polite: but the world isn't all right, for him. He is wrongly accused of theft and ends up in prison!

He didn't get out like St Paul, by invoking his Roman citizenship. Instead Paddington cleared his name - or rather, his adopted family, the Browns, and some of his fellow-convicts who had taken a shine to him, led by 'Knuckles' McGinty, did - they all worked together to find out who was really the thief.

Mother Kathryn asked us to reflect on Paddington's kindly, gentle nature in the light of the 'Beatitudes' in Matthew 5 [1-12] - 'Blessed are the poor in spirit, are the meek, are the merciful: blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness', and so on. Did Paddington show any of those blessed characteristics? He did. He was meek, and pure in heart (so far as we can know what's in a teddy bear's heart - especially a Peruvian bear, like Paddington).

But then there was the problem of evil. Why did such a good bear get into trouble? Because he was, really, a good bear. He was wrongly convicted; someone else did it. Who was the real thief? He was someone close to Paddington and his family; they knew him. But they didn't know his bad side.

But perhaps poor Paddington was getting his Brownie points anyway. 'Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake.'

'Be kind and polite'. Be kind; love your neighbour. And Paddington did that. He was always doing kind things. But - just like Jesus - when Paddington was in trouble, it seemed that he had been deserted. The Brown family missed a monthly visit to him in prison, and he shed a tear: 'Eloi, eloi, lama sabachthani', 'My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me', was Jesus' lament, quoting Psalm 22.

But we need to read on a bit in the lesson from Deuteronomy, chapter 10. This is what it says.

16 So now you must circumcise the foreskin of your hearts and not be stubborn any more,...

Just pausing for a moment there; I looked for a translation without this rather ghastly image, but I couldn't find one. The author of the book of Deuteronomy means that people should make their hearts more Jewish, more 'circumcised'. It's clearly a concept of its time. It doesn't seem to occur to the author that some of the hearts which need to 'circumcised' will belong to women, if nothing else - so, without going into the gory details, it just means, make your hearts more faithful to God. It is what it is. The passage goes on:

17 for the LORD your God is God of gods and Lord of lords, the great, mighty, and terrible God. He is no respecter of persons and is not to be bribed;

18 he secures justice for widows and orphans, and loves the alien who lives among you, giving him food and clothing.

19 You too must love the alien, for you once lived as aliens in Egypt.
[Deut. 10: 16-19, NEB]

Paddington was an alien; indeed, he was an economic migrant. He came to London to better himself. And the Brown family looked after him. They thought about him and tried to find ways to prove his innocence. I like to think they prayed for him too.

I wonder if it might be more palatable to some people to think of teddy bears in a made-up story, when they think of immigrants. Indeed, Mother Kathryn asked the audience on Thursday, ‘Would we be as receptive to Paddington if he were not a bear, but a boy?’ What do you think?

It’s serious stuff, Spiritual Cinema! Would we be as receptive to Paddington if he were not a bear, but a boy? I wondered whether we would. But if we reflected carefully on the various themes and issues that came up in the film, it would surely be a good thing for us to recognise that in some senses the story of a little bear from Peru is a metaphor for us, for grown-up people here near London in 2018.

We should bear it in mind that, according to the prophet Moses in the lesson from Deuteronomy, *[God] is no respecter of persons and is not to be bribed; 18 he secures justice for widows and orphans, and loves the alien who lives among you, giving him food and clothing. 19 You too must love the alien ...*

Are you OK with a teddy bear, Paddington, being ‘alien’? But what about a little boy? What if he has made it across the Mediterranean in a leaky, overloaded boat? Just a thought.

Do try coming to ‘Spiritual Cinema’. The next session will be on Monday 16th July. We will show a film called ‘On Wings of Eagles’. In the meantime, please do think about Paddington. Paddington the immigrant. Paddington the economic migrant. The alien. The alien that God says we must love.

Amen.

Hugh Bryant