

Sermon delivered by the Revd Rosemary
Durward on the 2nd Sunday before Advent
(Year C) Choral Evensong, St Mary's Church,
Stoke D'Abernon

Faith and Understanding

(Matthew 13: 44-52; Samuel 16: 1-13)

They say a joke with a punch-line is funny in the telling and I am not very good at the telling, so a wiser person might err on the side of caution. Throwing caution to the wind: here's one about a man who's so desperate to win the National Lottery that he gets down on his knees and prays. "Please, Lord, I'll do anything to win the National Lottery. I want it so much, I'll even become a Christian!"

Just as the Bishop was about to pounce on him with his crook and hook him into the church, the Lord answered and He said:

"For goodness sake, stand up. If you want to win, you're going to have to buy a ticket!"

Well, it's a good story, and the Lord does expect us to take responsibility for ourselves but not necessarily in paid employment. If this were the case, Matthew wouldn't have given up being a tax collector to become a disciple of Jesus.

No, the responsibility we have under God is in choosing which direction we face – choosing whether we turn ourselves in the direction of righteousness or towards evil; whether we listen to God's melody of wisdom, truth and justice or allow ourselves to be lured by the siren tune of the wicked, onto the rocks.

Now, if that sounds absolutist, it is. It deliberately goes against the subjective trend so many have identified as a feature of the current age; the trend that suggests there's no objective right or wrong – only what we think and feel.

It's perhaps instructive that St Anselm (11th Century) got short shrift when he settled on the imagination as a way of offering proof of God.

Anselm described God as the highest good that we can imagine. The retort came back over the centuries: what if a unicorn is all we can imagine?

Against the subjective, I'm going to suggest that there's nothing wrong with the absolute, so long as it's inclusive and universal, like God.

Consider this: there's nothing in the Church of England's liturgy that begins: 'For those who feel they may have sinned this week, please join in the prayers of penitence!' No, we have all sinned! It's something we all have in common.

To be clear, sin is objectively measurable against the absolute goodness of God.

Absolutely, knowledge of God is the jewel in the Crown, the pearl among pearls, the hidden treasure for us to find; and the King of Kings who was and is and is to come, perfect love.

That, I think, is the point that Jesus was making when he told the story of a man who struck lucky, the man who discovered treasure in a

field, buried it again and bought the whole field to secure the treasure; the merchant, who likewise, found just what he was looking for, the perfect pearl; who sold everything to purchase the pearl that he desired.

The treasure and the pearl are, of course, different representations of God's goodness and faithfulness. Jesus was advising: treasure knowledge of God for He is the gateway to the kingdom of heaven. And in typically apocalyptic terms, Jesus claimed that to choose anything other than God is to face the fiery furnace.

Well, we don't want that! But how practical is facing God?

I've come up with just a few thoughts about practical action that cascades from God's love. They are not exhaustive, by any means, but they might help to navigate some of the challenges we face in this era when emotions are running high; in a culture where the individual who feels the most, so often seems to prevail.

First, in the world, we might begin to see ourselves as sojourners, in but not necessarily of today's culture, taking time to observe before acting and speaking, so that in all we do we witness to Christ Jesus, and if necessary, counter-culturally.

Second, in the Church, we need to be mindful of the two faces of piety. We've probably all had some experience of evangelism that scares people away by claims to righteousness. Perhaps we need to think about how we hold onto the holy! But not so holy that our welcome in and beyond church extends only to self-defined, 'one of us'.

A third and related thought: we should stop thinking, if we ever did, that by declaring belief, we will necessarily have a place in heaven. It is not enough to self-identify. No, in matters of faith, we put ourselves in the hands of God, who is our judge and redeemer.

And finally, if we feel like letting our emotions run away with us - the simplest thing is to love the Lord. Because intentional faith (by that, I mean a faith we invest in with time and commitment to prayer, to worship, to hospitality, to learning, to charity), will intensify our love for God and so, our love for one another, and our love for the world.

Borrowing from Saint Augustine of Hippo (writing some 700 years earlier than St Anselm), we are pure and simply one community under God, bound together by the object of our love with a practical outworking in love that sacrifices for the common good, that goes the extra mile for our neighbours, to build a community of care, of mutual respect, of justice as love.

That is a vision of heaven summing up the whole of Scripture, but still, we need to ask ourselves (as Jesus did of his disciples), 'Do we truly understand?' Do we understand that the material things of this age will pass away,

according to their worth? Do we understand that we will not see God by standing up to defend our virtue or this or that self-interest but on our knees, with humble and contrite hearts?

The disciples seemed to understand.

For us ordinary folk coming after, struggling each in our own way with our own loves (under a God who seems to have all the time in the world to work his purposes out and who gives us immense freedom of choice whether we turn to face Him or not), we might just consider throwing ourselves at His mercy. Because for most if not all of us, our understanding is only by the grace of God, and that is how it should be.

Amen.