

Circuit Podcast 13th September 2020

Revd. Helen Hollands Education Sunday: Generosity of Spirit

I wonder if any of you watched any of the episodes of Alan Bennett's Talking Heads¹, shown on the BBC a few months ago. Set in the 1980's we are presented with a series of monologues of characters who often seem to us pretty ordinary – but only to begin with. They tell their story, if we are honest we begin to wonder about them, perhaps we make judgements based on their accents, gender, clothing and what they are saying at the start. One example, performed by Imelda Staunton, concerns a woman who talks about writing numerous complaint letters; to the council about paving stones, to shops about poor customer service and even to Social Services about how the family over the road treat their child. We are drawn into her world and quickly realise that she is on a downhill slippery slope, alienating, harassing and upsetting people. We do begin to understand how that is happening, most particularly her motivations which reveal a deep-set loneliness and a longing for connection with other people. We are shocked to learn that she ends up in prison but perhaps the greatest surprise is that she is loving it. At last she has people around her, a routine and a sense of purpose. We are left feeling sorry that somehow society failed her and we wonder why there was no better way to ease her pain. When we understand her better we cannot help but have compassion for who she has become and this is an education to us.

It is easy to make judgements about people at first sight. We are terribly good at it. We make judgements based on age, gender, sexuality, ethnicity when in truth we know little of another person's story and how they have become who they are. In Harper Lee's book, 'To Kill a Mockingbird' her character Atticus Finch says to his young daughter, 'You never really understand a person until you consider things from their point of view, until you climb into their skin and walk around in it...'²

Our reading from Romans is all about judgement and how we are to leave it to God. Paul is challenging the early church who have had the experience of creating the church from the ground up. We know something of their history from the book of Acts, of how their fellowship is based in prayer, learning and the breaking of bread. Yet, by the time Paul writes to the church in our passage they are arguing about religious rules and ritual practices that are a hangover from things that used to matter in the past. They want to judge one another rather than broaden their perspective to truly understand that God looks past their conflict and calls them to do the same. For some one day is a feast, for others it is not. For some particular foods are forbidden, for others it is not. Paul says, do what you do with honour, even if it is different from your neighbour, but do not make the judgement that yours is the better way. As the hymn says, 'bring your traditions richest store'³ but do not dismiss others, avoid meanness of spirit – be generous as God is generous.

Judgement, forgiveness, generosity are all big themes for today which is Education Sunday. Perhaps that is highly appropriate because we are all learners, our faith is all about

¹ <https://www.bbc.co.uk/iplayer/episodes/p08ftkxk/alan-bennetts-talking-heads>, accessed 11th September 2020

² Harper Lee, *To Kill a Mockingbird*, 1960, ch. 3, pg. 39

³ R. Jones, *Come all who look to Christ today*, StF 678, Methodist publishing

reflection and transformation which doesn't just happen once, it is on-going. We are never fully formed as people of faith. Whatever our age we are all called to go on learning, Christianity is not a static thing, it is an on-going living and breathing thing.

Many of our children and young people have returned to school this week, some for the first time. Our teachers and headteachers have worked for months, despite changing regulations, to make this possible for them. I was able to understand this more fully when I attended a governors' meeting at John Wesley school in Ashford this week, a Methodist/Anglican school. The care that has been taken is extraordinary and everyone is continually learning more about how to teach and learn in this new normal. You may be interested to know that there are almost 90 Methodist schools in the country, supported by Methodist and other denominations, encouraging staff and children in their faith, several of them in our part of East Kent. We continue to pray for them.

Right now, we are all called to be a learning people in a time of change. What have you learnt in recent months? Perhaps you have accessed the internet for the first time, maybe you have learnt more about technology, neighbours, people from other churches in the circuit and beyond, how to do virtual worship, risk assessments or zoom. Let us go on learning – without judgement of one another but being welcoming, virtually or in person. Let us try to leave our old irritations behind, whatever those are, as we move to an inevitably different future. Let us wonder what God, who is continually doing a new thing, has in store for us next. God who works on us from within and calls us and all people to generous, abundant fullness of life. Amen