

St. Mark's, Niagara on the Lake
The Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost, year 'A' (proper 24)
17 September 2023
The Rev'd Leighton Lee

WHO DO WE THINK WE ARE?

This morning's readings remind me of a joke by the comedian Emo Phillips I heard years ago—apparently it was voted the funniest religious joke of all time. Anyway, here goes:

Once I saw this guy on a bridge about to jump. I said, "Don't do it!" He said, "Nobody loves me." I said, "God loves you. Do you believe in God?" He said, "Yes." I said, "Are you a Christian or a Jew?" He said, "A Christian." I said, "Me, too! Protestant or Catholic?" He said, "Protestant." I said, "Me, too! What franchise?" He said, "Baptist." I said, "Me, too! Northern Baptist or Southern Baptist?" He said, "Northern Baptist." I said, "Me, too! Northern Conservative Baptist or Northern Liberal Baptist?" He said, "Northern Conservative Baptist." I said, "Me, too! Northern Conservative Baptist Great Lakes Region, or Northern Conservative Baptist Eastern Region?" He said, "Northern Conservative Baptist Great Lakes Region." I said, "Me, too! Northern Conservative Baptist Great Lakes Region Council of 1879, or Northern Conservative Baptist Great Lakes Region Council of 1912?" He said, "Northern Conservative Baptist Great Lakes Region Council of 1912." I said, "Die, heretic!" And I pushed him over.

Or, to be more serious, St Paul writing to the Romans: "Welcome those who are weak in faith, but not for the purpose of quarrelling over opinions." For some reason, followers of Christ, since the very beginning, have fallen prey to the temptation to stigmatize, marginalize and even ostracize those who don't believe exactly as they do. Heresy hunting was our favourite sport. But don't think that this sort of thing doesn't go on in the modern, twenty-first-century, or that it's just the so-called "conservatives" who are guilty of doing it.

That's not surprising—or shouldn't be. After all, human beings are tribal by nature. Civilization and multiculturalism are actually very fragile and shallow things— as the resurgence of far-right politics on the global scene attests. The thing is, the Church is *supposed* to be the antidote to tribalism, and it's *supposed* to be transformative, not only of the individual, but of society, too. Remember Paul's admonition to these same Romans, which we heard only a couple of weeks ago?

"Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect. For by the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think of

yourself more highly than you ought to think.”

Or, to put it another way, who do we think we are? We tend to think of ourselves in terms of our accomplishments, our positions, our titles, our personal narratives, yet scripture teaches us that we are to think of ourselves in one way only: as those who are conformed to Christ. God doesn't care whether someone's a successful professional, or a perfect parent, or in the size of their bank account, or where they spent their summer holiday. The fact that *we* care about these things—sometimes to the point of neurosis—shows just how poorly conformed to Christ our lives are.

Now, I'm not saying that being successful, or having money in the bank, or holidaying well is wrong. Not at all. Very few of us are called to a truly simple, quasi-monastic life. What I'm saying is that if we truly take to heart what Paul is writing about in his letter to the Romans, if we truly learn not to think of ourselves more highly than we ought, if we welcome without reserve those who are weak in faith, if we refuse to get drawn into this controversy or the other, then we will become—or at least begin to become—Christ-like.

That sounds like another pious bromide. After all, what exactly *does* it mean to be Christ-like? At the very least it means being the kind of person who is willing to forgive not seven times, but seventy-seven times. It means being the kind of person who forgives even what is justly owed us, in order that another can live free. It means having the maturity to let others live with integrity as their conscience dictates. It means putting things in their proper perspective by refusing to be caught up in all of the world's partialities. It means striving to make our communities and our world, places where difference is embraced and human frailty accepted as a fact of life.

David Hempton, the Dean of Divinity at Harvard, once said

“Belonging to an institution, as with belonging to a family, involves the acceptance of our own frailties and those of others in a spirit of generosity and mutual forbearance, even when we fiercely disagree with and irritate one another. There is no belonging without self-acceptance.”

My dear friends, you and I belong here, in this place, as Anglican Christians, for one reason only: God has called us to be here, not because we're special, or superior, or have figured out the correct theology, but because we are *loved* by him and have gifts that are needed in the building of his kingdom. He has called us to leave the life we knew and loved—the selves we knew and loved—and, like the ancient Israelites, to follow him out of a land of hostility and bondage into a land of freedom and peace. The journey is arduous and sometimes alarming, that I grant you, with destructive forces looming high on either side that threaten to crash over us and drown us. In the face of such terrors, we are tempted to turn back, to fall back on our old ways, old routines, old alliances. Yet somehow we know that this cannot be, and we know this because we also *know* who—and whose—we are.

And because we know these things, we also know that others have been called to help build that kingdom, too—others with whom we might disagree or whose faith looks to be pretty weak indeed. So why the quarrelling? Shouldn't we all try to stick together, despite the differences? After all, the journey of faith is made on the most narrow and precarious of bridges which spans from this present existence of contingency and death to the future existence of fulfilment and life. The journey of faith can be seemingly so bleak and pointless that we are tempted at times to jump off the bridge and into the waters of chaos that hem us in on either side. But we are stopped and pulled back from the brink by One whose test isn't what we think, but how we act, and how we love. It's high time that we learned to journey—and live and love and forgive—as he did.