

**First Sunday after Trinity 2017 (Evening)**

**1 Samuel 21; Luke 11: 14 – 28**

Well, what singularly unhelpful readings we've been set this evening! I don't know what to make of 1 Samuel 21, I'm sure. It's part of a much larger narrative and, served up in isolation on a warm summer's evening, just seems a rather weird and frankly rather disillusioning story about David. He's meant to be the great King and prime ancestor of Jesus. The evangelists go to great lengths to legitimise their claim that Jesus was the Messiah by establishing that he was a son of David. Yet here is David acting rather bizarrely, and perhaps more importantly, acting deceitfully.

What we can perhaps most usefully take away from this reading, though, and bear it in mind whilst we concentrate on the Gospel reading, is that whilst it might upset us and disappoint us to see David being deceitful - and make us feel that David is demeaned by

the story – it seems to cause the narrator of the First Book of Samuel no problem whatsoever: David is in enemy territory and therefore has to be crafty to get by. The moral for us is that we have to be careful to make sure we are not using inappropriate critical faculties, or asking the wrong questions, when we approach a story that has travelled across centuries and cultures to reach us.

When we hear St. Luke's Gospel being proclaimed, as we have this evening, and we hear stories about Jesus casting out demons, we're quite likely to be sceptical. We're likely to ask ourselves whether it really happened. And if it didn't really happen, it can have nothing to say to us. But nobody in the story asks whether it happened. They ask a different question. They ask "Why did it happen?" "By what power did it happen?" This story isn't about what happens: it's about people's response to what happens. So if we get hung up on what the story isn't about anyway, we miss the point of what it is really about.

This evening's Gospel reading is about how we discern what comes from God and, more importantly, what we do about it. And the answer to the first part is that we know something comes from God if the outcomes are the same as other stuff that comes from God. If the outcome promotes human flourishing, then it can't come from anywhere else other than God.

One of the earliest hymns in Christian worship – some scholars think dating back to the earliest days before the rituals of worship were formalised – is “Ubi caritas et amor, deus ibi est.” There's a wonderful setting of it by Duruflé based on a Gregorian melody that itself might (or might not!) go as far back as the fourth century. And of course there's a Taizé chant for the same words; and we used it here during Lent on a Monday evening.

The words translate as “Where there's love and charity, that's where God is.” Its use particularly associated with Maundy Thursday and Jesus washing

the disciples' feet. Where we see selflessness; where we see compassion; where we see people being set free and liberated – either from material circumstances, or illness, or from the debilitating consequences of their own obsessions – when we see the politically or economically dispossessed being given a voice and having their dignity restored; that's when we see God. So, in this evening's Gospel reading Jesus says that when a mute person suddenly recovers their ability to speak, it can only be because of God. It couldn't be Beelzebul, because if it were, he'd be acting against himself.

And that means that this week on the streets of North Kensington; in the mosques and the gurdwaras and churches and sports halls; where people have been bringing blankets and clothes and toiletries and food and water to the people who've lost everything in the Grenfell Tower fire; in all these places we have been seeing God in action. If you ask *how* God could have allowed the fire to happen, the answer is that I don't

know. When tragedies like this happen it would only be a very shallow and insensitive faith that was not challenged by it. But if you ask me *where* was God, I can point you straight to him. We've just heard it proclaimed that Jesus said "Whoever is not with me is against me." If we invert that to make it positive, it would say "Whoever is for me is with me." We've seen many people this week – of all faiths, from all backgrounds and from all walks of life – responding with the values of Jesus' Kingdom. Therefore they have been responding with Jesus.

And that means that in recent weeks, not just after the Grenfell Tower fire, but at the Better Together events over the weekend to commemorate the murder Jo Cox and after the terrorist attacks in Manchester and London, too, the kingdom of God has come near us. But whenever the kingdom is near there is a threefold invitation that comes with it: to identify it, to name it and to join in with it. Our Gospel ends with Jesus saying that his blessing is for those who obey the word

of God once they've heard, or - we might add - seen it. We live in bewildering and frightening times. But that also means there is an urgent possibility to capture God and to be captivated by him.

Amen.