Sermon for Matins, Trinity 17 *Mother Emma*

Readings: Proverbs 2:1-17, Mark 10:2-16

Today we have been celebrating - in a muted way because of current restrictions - our Harvest Thanksgiving.

In such a time of anxiety about health, livelihoods, economic concerns and the return of isolated loneliness, we are still reminded to be thankful for the many blessings we have been given and to give what we can ourselves to enable others to share in them.

On Friday night, in the pouring rain, a number of volunteers from St Mary Abbots’ congregation took part in a sponsored sleepout to raise money for the West London Churches’ Homeless Charity, Glass Door, sleeping in St Mary Abbots Centre Car Park. Over breakfast at 6 am in the morning, the sleepers spoke of how humbling it had been to experience, even just for a fleeting moment, what so many people go through every night, and told me how it had increased their sense of compassion and their desire to help. We have been very grateful for the generous support given by many of you in sponsoring the sleepers, and this will go towards providing care, support and advocacy for rough sleepers across West London.

Our Harvest offerings of groceries today will go to the Upper Room in Shepherd’s Bush, who prepare hot meals for those in need, and we have been very pleased in recent months to be able to offer the use of the Centre’s kitchen to the Sant-Egidio community, a Roman Catholic group who do the same thing here in Kensington.

All these charities have spoken recently of the huge increase in demand for their services, as people face the uncertainties and losses caused by the pandemic. Those of us fortunate enough to have food to eat and somewhere to sleep, as well as loving families to support us, are regularly humbled by the stories of others not so fortunate, and this often leads to great generosity within our community and others.

Humility is the key to our readings at Matins today.

Jesus rebukes his disciples for turning away the families who bring their little children to him for blessing. No-one is so unimportant that they fall outside the sphere of Christ’s love. Not only does he say that he is willing to give his time and his love to embracing them and praying for them, but he makes very clear that the innocence and humility of children is to be imitated by us all.

His debate with the learned and argumentative Pharisees demonstrates clearly Jesus’ dislike of legalism. He is concerned with what God wills, not with what the Law might allow.

St Mark is careful to make it clear that Jesus does not contradict the laws of Moses followed by devout Jews, but that he tries to explain -these are simply a basic minimum, laid down for those who are hard of heart.

We are clearly shown that he is unimpressed with people who congratulate themselves on following the letter of the Law, but don’t seem to have grasped the Spirit behind it.

Yes, it is “legal” under Mosaic Law for a man to write a bill of divorce and “put his wife away”. Yet the ideal established in Paradise is that of a man and wife who become one flesh, and Jesus encourages his followers not simply to follow the law, but to aim for God’s standards of loving perfection, although he does seem to acknowledge that sadly, in a fallen world, this will not always work out.

Learning and knowledge in the form vaunted by the Pharisees is not Christ’s vision of true knowledge either, nor that of the Hebrew Scriptures.

Our first reading from Proverbs insists that the way to receive true wisdom is to incline our ear to God’s voice, and our heart to understanding. Then, and only then, will we learn that it is in our awe and reverence towards God – described by the Scriptures as “the fear of the Lord”, that we shall find true knowledge.

In the Garden of Eden, where the perfect example of matrimony was found, Adam and Eve were warned not to eat of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, in case they suddenly gained the knowledge which would lead them to turn away and cease to obey God.

As with the Pharisees, knowledge without humility can be a dangerous thing. Proverbs tells us:“For the Lord giveth wisdom: out of his mouth cometh knowledge and understanding.”

How does all this apply to us today? The Scriptures teach us that in humble obedience and a heart open to God’s wisdom, we will learn to walk in the paths of righteousness. The message of our readings seems to be clear: when human beings seek to act in their own strength, through a belief in their own abilities and achievements, Scripture teaches us that they will end up unable to distinguish between good and evil, between truth and falsehood, between the ways of darkness and the ways of light.

Like Adam and Eve, who on tasting the fruit which gave them the knowledge of good and evil, became so hung up on the fact they were naked, they no longer felt able to talk freely and openly with God, our own, wrongly-acquired knowledge can inhibit us from obedience to God’s will.

It is only if we can achieve the humility, the open curiosity and trust associated with young children that we will hear the voice of God.

Christians must speak out against those who vaunt their own superior knowledge, their self-orientated world view, and who seek to blur the boundaries between what we, as Christians, believe to be right and wrong. We must model a world and a society filled with respect for God, his creatures and his creation; for our neighbours and for everyone made in his image.

We can only do this if we humble ourselves constantly to see the world from the perspective of others, to seek out those who need help and support and to be open and obedient to the promptings of God’s Spirit within our hearts**. Amen**