

Epiphany 7 Year A

Loving the outsider or enemy

Readings: Leviticus 19: 1 - , 9 – 18

Psalm 119: 33 – 40

1 Corinthians 3: 10-11, 16-23

Last week, we were challenged about making the right choices to better ourselves; especially in terms of the way we relate with others. We were challenged to consider how our behaviour, particularly the way we treated people, signified our covenant relationship with God and with God's people. Today, our lectionary readings continue to bring that focus to our attention.

In the Gospel of Matthew, we earlier heard Jesus urging his followers that their righteousness should exceed that of the Pharisees and Scribes. This was in terms of the way they understood or interpreted the Law including how they lived out their covenant relationship. Today, all three of our lections, from Leviticus, 1 Corinthians and Matthew urge God's people to consider what it means to "be holy" (Lev. 19:2; 1 Cor. 3:17b; Mt. 5:48). But Matthew has Jesus saying to his disciples: "Be perfect, therefore, as your heaven Father is perfect." Their sense "of being" as God's people was tied in with their function. In other words, who they were

was reflected by what they did or through their behaviour; the way they treated others.

I'd like to ask you to raise your hand if you think you are holy. Raise your hands if you think you are perfect.

It's not easy to know how to respond to suggestions of one's holiness and perfection. The ancient understanding of holiness was not tied to the idea of being right or good; rather it was about being set aside for a particular purpose only. It defined whether something was for common use or for a special or unique purpose; it identified that something was different from the ordinary. God was

considered holy because the Israelites believed there was only one true God that should be worshipped – even if other people believed in other gods. And the Israelites considered themselves holy because they believed they were chosen, from among other peoples, by God to serve God’s purpose. They were set apart from others and, therefore, were a holy people.

But being set apart did not mean, disengaging with everyone else. The Israelites believed that they were blessed in their covenant relationship with the Lord their God through their ancestors like Abraham. But being holy also meant that like Abraham, they were

ultimately to be blessing to the rest of the world. Their holiness was ultimately to be lived out for the well-being and good of others; others who were different to them.

As Christians, as people of God today, to be holy or to be called “holy” is not an easy thing to handle. Today, sometimes the term is used in a cynical way – like being “holier than thou.” It has negative connotations whereby one is too good for others or far better than others; where one looks down one’s nose upon others as being lesser than one’s self.

Yet, we’ve seen that to be holy is about serving a special purpose (in terms of God’s

will) that ultimately is to be a blessing to others.

We know that it's not always easy to get along with other people; especially those very different to us. For most of us, there are many people we get along with very well. When we're with them, the meeting and mood is usually very friendly and enjoyable. But there maybe individuals that we often struggle to engage with on good terms. There maybe one or two that, even though we smile and shake hands, we can still sense some sort of bad vibe or negativity. There may also be one or two that we sometimes find annoying or pestering. There might even be one or two

that we hold a grudge against; those whom we just can't stand the sight of and greatly struggle to forgive. For those whom we find it a real challenge to engage with meaningfully the easiest thing for us to do is to try and avoid them; to disengage with them. This perhaps easier to do rather than responding in ways that seek to affirm and strengthen the relationship.

If you were to be honest with yourself, raise your hand if you know about the difficulties of dealing with certain people. Raise your hand if you've found it easier to simply avoid them. Now raise your hand if you've taken the harder option of building up that relationship.

It's a lot harder to love those with whom you have differences.

Our reading from Leviticus is part of what is known as the holiness code. The instructions given were to help God's people live out their covenant relationship through the way they engaged with others as their neighbour. This meant being mindful not to do anything that would damage their relationship with fellow Israelites. It also extended to showing compassion to those very different from themselves – alien or non-Israelite. “When you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not reap to the very edges of your field, o

gather the gleanings of your harvest. You shall not strip your vineyards bare, or gather the fallen grapes of your vineyard; you shall leave them for the poor and the alien: I am the Lord your God” (Lev. 19: 9-10).

This is the right thing to do with people who are not like you. You are to good and show mercy to them, even though they have not had a hand in helping you. Even when they seem like a burden on your resources, you shall bless them.

- Paul in Corinth dealing with differences of opinion and teachings causing splits in the church.

- “For God’s temple is holy, and you are that temple” (1 Cor. 3: 17). Paul challenges the church to rethink about the respect for each other as they did for the holiness of the temple.
- A warning about disrepecting the church and fellow Christians by causing divisions and destroying the church.

Jesus.

- Perfection is not about always doing the right thing, but more about being set apart and being the difference or making the difference in terms of relating with others.

- Turn the other cheek, give also the coat, walk the extra mile.

Sign of grace and acceptance – Baptism today.

A man had just arrived in Heaven, told Peter how grateful he was to be in such a glorious place, and asked Peter to give him one glimpse into Hades in order that he might appreciate his good fortune even more. This Peter did. In Hades he saw a long table extending as far as the eye could reach, laden down with the most delicious of all varieties of foods. But everyone around the table was starving to death. When asked for an

explanation, Peter said, “Everyone is required to take food from the table only with four-foot-long chopsticks. They are so long that no one can reach the food from the table to his mouth, and therefore each one is dying of starvation.”

Quickly they returned to Heaven, and behold, the new arrival saw an identical table, laden down with identical foods, but everyone around the table was happy and well fed. Then he said to Peter: “With what do they take the food from the table?” and Peter answered, “Only with four-foot-long chopsticks.” At that the new arrival inquired: “Then why are all those in Hades starving to death while all those up here are so well fed

and happy?” Whereupon Peter replied: “In Heaven we feed each other.” (Harry C. Mabry)