

Turning the world upside down

A sermon preached by the *Revd. Dr Rob Gilbert* on the 1st September, at St Peter's, Wolvercote, at 12.00 noon.

Hebrews, ch. 13, vv. 1-8, 15-16 and Luke, ch. 14, vv. 1, 7-14.

Today's world often seems completely at odds with the ideals expressed in the Gospels. The reading from Luke we just heard is a prime example – in which, yet again, Jesus reminds us that the kingdom of God is characterised by a bringing of the people at the edge of things into the middle, that the kingdom of God is characterised by the turning upside-down of what the world tends to think right, at least the world of those in charge.

There are two ways we can hear both our Gospel and the reading from the letter to the Hebrews today. One way concerns an understanding of the world known to Jesus and the writer of the letter to the Hebrews, and what they needed to say to that world. The other concerns an understanding of the world *we* live in and what these readings say to *us* and our world.

Jesus's world was a place in which dictators maintained power by force and there were uprisings. It was a world in which there was sharp social division between the poor and the rich, and between those who were considered in the right and those considered in the wrong. It was a world of international trade and overseas invasion – and a mingling of the two. Jesus's world was also a world in which having certain illnesses or doing certain jobs made you the kind of person no one would be likely to want to know. And a world in which it was normal to be suspicious of foreigners and strangers. So, Jesus's world was much like ours: our world of asylum seekers, refugees, and unnecessary disease. Our world that includes Syria and Iraq.

This week saw the commemoration of one way in which we have got better at making life good for one another, by the fulfilling of the dream that Martin Luther King had 50 years ago. But still it can seem impossible to know what to do in the face of a world like ours in which there is still such injustice and basic need. But the Luke reading and the reading from Hebrews offer us a place to start: with our own time and place – with doing what we can to turn upside-down the world's structures of power, subverting it in the way we can for the good of those who are in need. This can seem especially hard when we might feel sometimes that we ourselves are the people who are in the cold.

But what *can* we do in the face of so much need? One short answer is to echo the Hebrews reading and treat strangers as if they were angels. This theme of strangers being possible angels, possible messengers from God, echoes directly the origins of our faith – how Abraham showed hospitality to strangers at the Oaks of Mamre, and found they were two angels and the Lord God himself. This is a visit we commemorate with the Rublev icon in this church. It is an attitude to strangers which is as old as our tradition and which yet seems completely fresh as a practical parable on how to live in the world. God wants us to be his friends, to be intimate with him like we are with friends, so one of the most important ways to entertain strangers as if they were angels, messengers from God, is to treat them as friends, as Abraham did.

You will I suspect be able to tell me your own stories of how treating strangers as angels can be lived out in our world, but here is one story I find helpful. It concerns a little boy in

Sophiatown, South Africa, the community served by Fr Trevor Huddleston. Each day on his way past the little boy's garden Fr Huddleston would raise his hat to the little boy's mother, and the little boy noticed this. Here was a white man who was acknowledging his black mother. Here, in the language of our reading from Hebrews, was a man who, despite the fact that the government had made her a legal stranger by Apartheid, treated his mother like an angel, treated her like a friend. Well, the boy's name was Desmond Tutu, and he tells this story with the implication that this was why he became a priest. Trevor Huddleston cannot have imagined for a moment the sheer grace that would flow from his simple act of kindness. Think of the outstanding good Desmond Tutu has achieved in his country – how the Truth and Reconciliation Commission brought about something that seemed almost impossible, a way for people who had been hurt terribly to forgive the people who had harmed them.

While the reading from Luke's Gospel reminds us in simple terms of the message that God wants to take the people on the edge, the strangers, and bring them to the centre, our reading from Hebrews reminds us of what a blessing can come from that. A blessing on a whole country, like Desmond Tutu's blessing on South Africa, and a blessing in our own lives, because we never know how a stranger we meet can be an angel for us, a messenger from God for us. We never know what good difference they might make to our lives.

Amen.