

Trinity 19, Proper 25

‘My people shall never again be put to shame.’

It says it twice (vv26 & 27). What has been their shame? Their shame has been that the swarming locust has come and has eaten their crops – the hopper, the destroyer, the cutter. We wouldn’t call it shame; we’d call it misfortune. We wouldn’t say – ‘ha, that shows you are contemptible, worthless’. We’d set up LiveAid or Comic Relief; the DEC would leap into action and we’d all be giftaiding our donations. But that’s because we live in AD. BC famine, malnutrition, starvation met not with charity but with contempt.

Sure, the ancient people of God Joel is addressing had plenty to be ashamed about: their idolatry, their injustice, their failure to meet up to the moral standards demanded of them by their law, their lack of care for the poor and the widow. Much to be ashamed of but to them and to their neighbours the shame wasn’t that; it was the locust, it was their bare fields, stripped clean by those non-human invaders.

And a prophet says ‘my people shall never again be put to shame’. How was that to be fulfilled? I guess they probably thought that meant, no more locusts, no more shaming shortage of food, no more human invasion either, no more defeat, no more suffering at the hands of others, no more ignominy. Today is Bible Sunday and we remember that all holy Scripture is written for our learning, that all is inspired and part God’s self-disclosure, his revelation to us and to all humanity. But sometimes those inspired words especially in the OT, BC, have to be read and received in a new way. Or to put it in another way, the prophetic words are fulfilled but not always quite as their utterer might have expected.

For the work of salvation has to dig deeper and root out some of the assumptions that are given in the world of the prophet and one of those assumptions has to do with shame. Shame is one of the most powerful emotions that we experience and part of the whole human condition is that it gets misplaced. The wrong people experience it or the right people experience it but for the wrong reasons or, in the case of many who suffer at the hands of either circumstance or others, shame becomes the last injustice; as if what they had experienced wasn’t bad enough, the burden of shame is added to it. The classic case of this is the victim of rape or sexual harassment and molestation. Added to the physical hurt and indignity, added to the mental shock and torment, added to the emotional trauma and confusion, is often a further burden that seems to have weeded its way in as invited as the human aggressor – the feeling of shame. Somebody wrote

Unlike guilt, which is the feeling of doing something wrong shame is the feeling of being something wrong.

Carl Jung said that ‘Shame is a soul eating emotion.’

Shame has a point. Misplaced it can be viciously destructive; in the right context and experienced aright it is what can lead us to Grace. The right sort of shame is what brought the tax-collector to the Temple. Like Ronnie Corbett in that old TWTWTW class sketch, he knew his place. He stood, it says, far off, he would not even look up to heaven but beat his breast and said ‘God, be merciful to me, a sinner’. And it was his prayer that day that was heard. It’s his prayer in our day that is heard. That’s why we kneel to pray – or some of us still do – especially when we confess our sins. It’s the body language of the tax-collector. It’s why we still use his words ‘God, be merciful to me, a sinner’; ‘Lord, have mercy’, ‘Lord, in your mercy, hear our prayer.’ And that’s because we have learnt from

the lips of our Lord that those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and all who humble themselves will be exalted. The first will be last and the last will be first. It's the secret of the kingdom. It's the great turning things upside down that Jesus not only taught but lived. It's why it's right near the beginning of St Paul's magnum opus, his great letter to the Romans, though so many miss its significance.

'I am not ashamed of the gospel; it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith.' That was an impossibility to everyone who heard that message in the 1st century Mediterranean world. The idea of a crucified Christ was an absurdity; this was weakness, not power, this was shame, not glory. But when Paul the Pharisee met the crucified and risen Lord on the road to Damascus his whole world was turned upside down. But he wasn't different from anyone else: he helped the whole world to see things upside down, to see that being crushed by the violence of others isn't weakness but can be strength; that being physically, mentally and emotionally put to the rack by others is nothing to be ashamed of but – quite the contrary – is something we can glory in, take pride in. Paul chose his words carefully. He said 'I am not ashamed of the gospel' because others assumed that there was nothing more shameful than being crucified; he wrote 'it is the power of God' for salvation because others assumed it was just weak and effete. And Paul the Pharisee knew this not just in his head but in every fibre of his being because he hadn't just received this as a message but as a calling and a pattern of living. Believing in a crucified Christ meant for him sharing in his sufferings, being in that same place of what the world would count as shame, weakness and humiliation.

There are two Pharisees in our readings today and in some ways they sound similar and make similar boasts. One says, 'I am not like other people.... I fast twice a week; I give a tenth of all my income.' The other says, 'I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. From now on there is reserved for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, will give to me on that day.' Both hold their heads up, both are confident, even proud. But the difference is where that confidence comes from. For Paul, it is what sustains him through imprisonment, shipwrecks, beatings, desertion by others, trial, near consignment to the lions in the Colosseum. Everything that the world regarded as shameful. 'But my people shall never again be put to shame'.

The gospel Paul proclaimed, the gospel the church has proclaimed down the centuries, has transformed our world. It has taught the world that there is no shame in weakness, poverty, disability, social origins or sickness. It needs to continue teaching both itself and the world beyond that there is danger in misplacing shame. We need to be bearers of good news to the victims of rape and abuse; we need to be deep wells of salvation to those who feel shame where they should be able to be proud, they should be able to walk tall.

If what I have said has stirred something in you either on your own behalf or on behalf of someone you know and care about, then why not use our wholeness and healing prayer team during communion and ask them to pray for you or your loved one. There is no shame in asking for prayer. Being dependent on the grace of God and the kindness of others isn't shameful – it is our salvation.

Let us keep a moment of quiet and prayer now.

'God, be merciful to me, a sinner.'

