

A few weeks ago I served up a sermon which started with some classy jokes and you... you just sat there. Obviously you were listening to a sermon, so you sat there, what I mean is you sat there in palpably unamused silence. This is nothing unusual, particularly at the 8 am service where it's way too early on a Sunday morning for anything to be funny. If the Marx Brothers and Monty Python turned up to entertain St Mary's early eucharist with their best ever gags their double act would be greeted with a sulky silence. Now I've been recycling pre-covid sermons through most of the pandemic so I'm definitely out of practice, but partly I think the silence greeting my attempt at your amusement was embarrassment because the opening joke was perhaps just a slightly uncomfortable one for you (even when it had been soaked in sanitiser to make it suitable for church) because if referenced gays in the military and alluded to the non-sanitised original witticism being more, erm, anatomical. By the way some of you really do have debauched minds because the anatomical structure I wouldn't mention in the joke was nothing more taboo than a finger. Please nobody else tell me what they actually thought it was. I'm a man of the world, but not in church.

Anyway, although I try to live and learn, just like my puppy who regularly eats his dinner too fast, regurgitates it on the carpet and then enjoys it all over again, I'm back this week to that slightly uncomfortable 'why does he have to talk about that?' territory, though this time not in the form of a joke, but as a question. Sulky silence at the ready? Here goes.

What was the sin of Sodom?

Don't put your hands up please, I'm not going to take any answers from the floor; remember how squeamish your fellow churchgoers were just a couple of weeks ago.

What was the sin of Sodom?

It's a question that never got into any of the St Mary's Lockdown quizzes- which are still running by the way and have featured such memorable rounds as 'cheese or disease' 'does it float' and 'tell me what's in the jar just by listening to me shaking it.' Lockdown was long and we got tired of asking each other how many lines there are in a sonnet.

Back to the question 'What was the sin of Sodom?'

I'm not asking in order to embarrass you, but because I think it's an important question. It *must* be an important question because according to the book of Genesis the city of Sodom together with its twin Gomorrah was - uniquely in the history of civilisation- destroyed by God because of its sin. God's behaviour to sinful cities seems to have changed since then- otherwise nobody would live in London- but it's still important to understand what was so offensive to God that he opened up the box marked 'sulphurous destruction' and let rip.

'What was the sin of Sodom?'

It's not what you and /or a whole load of conservative christians might think. What you might think is that the answer to the question is 'homosexuality', hence the word 'sodomite'. Or if you fancy yourself slightly more liberal, and theologically literate you might say 'it's the sin of wishing to force your carnal attention on angels'.

But both answer are wrong.

What was the sin of Sodom?' What was it, this sin of Sodom and Gomorrah, this sin so obnoxious to God that he destroyed every single one of the inhabitants bar one family minus the wife?

For the answer we need to go to the prophet Ezekiel who's temporarily stopped lying on his side to speak truth to power:

Ezekiel 16- "This was the sin [guilt] of your sister Sodom: she and her daughters had pride, excess of food, and prosperous ease, but did not aid the poor and needy."

Well there's an eyeopener. Bet you haven't heard that verse as often as Romans 1:27 or Leviticus 18:22.

It's sometimes pointed out that if you took a sharp pair of scissors and cut out all the verses in the Bible that *might* refer to same-sex relationships you wouldn't notice the difference when you'd finished; if you took the same scissors and cut out all the verses referring to the poor and needy you'd have made yourself a paper colander to put on the dresser next to your chocolate teapot. Because a Bible without the poor and needy is as useless as said choc-crockery and a lot less tasty.

Well Ezekiel is one of the, erm, eccentrics from the Old Testament but no excuse: Jesus' teaching is the same. When, in the parable, the goats of damnation ask why they are not sheep of salvation the answer is:

*I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not give me clothing, sick and in prison and you did not visit me.*

I could just go on and on and on with the Bible quotes about the poor and needy and after fifteen minutes when it would be clear no end was in sight you'd be begging me to tell you those dodgy 'jokes' from two weeks ago instead. Our response to the poor and needy is so important to what God thinks we should do that he goes on and on and on about it, rubbing our faces in it and ramming it down our throats.

Love your neighbour. Who is my neighbour? Anyone in need is your neighbour. The people queuing outside the food bank are our neighbour. The people crossing the channel on a dinghy are our neighbour. On and on and on it goes. We all have a lot of neighbours.

The Harvest Festival we celebrate today is a celebration of fullness: of good things gathered in. It's a party about plenty. It's a Christian Festival, a Jewish festival, a Chinese festival, a pagan festival: everybody likes their larder full, everybody loves the food-security of a full cupboard.

At the end of this service we'll be singing, loudly and lustily as ever, the perennial harvest hymn with it's chorus:

*'All good gifts around us are sent from heaven above;  
Then thank the Lord, O thank the Lord for all his love'*

How do we thank the Lord? Well to be honest, perhaps not *just* by coming to church and singing harvest hymns.

Return to the Scriptures and take a listen to the Spirit speaking through Ezekiel's angrier predecessor Prophet Amos. Here's what he says:

*Because you trample on the poor and take from them levies of grain, you have built houses of hewn stone, but you shall not live in them; you have planted pleasant vineyards, but you shall not drink their wine.*

*I hate, I despise your festivals, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies. ... Take away from me the noise of your songs; I will not listen to the melody of your harps. But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.*

Obviously I'm not suggesting that God hates Harvest Festivals or we shouldn't come to church. On the contrary, we were created to worship God and how else are we going to learn what he wants from us *unless* we gather together to hear the Word and receive the sacraments? But there must be balance. What is relevant is *both* what we do here today, *and* what we do the rest of the week; what we do here today ticks some of the boxes of our faith, but not all of them. No church, no faith. No justice, no faith.

*'Faith without works'* St James wrote *'is dead.'*

Now some of Jesus' teaching is hard, very hard, impossibly hard for most of us. Except for the holiest of saints 'Go sell all you own and give the proceeds to the poor' has proved to be beyond almost every person who has ever come to church. But treating others as we would have them treat us is not. We can all do that. We can grow more generous hearts. That's not beyond us. Welcoming strangers is not beyond us. Sharing our bounty is not beyond us. Whenever we are in a position to influence matters for the better we can do. All of us over a certain age can vote for example- we can try lay to one side thinking 'what will be most advantageous for me', and opt instead for what will be best for the disadvantaged, the poor and needy.

Little things that change the world- for the better and for the worse- are within the power of all of us.

We don't need to grasp our handful quite so tight. We can open our hands. Scatter the seed. It's hard to prize our mitts open, I know. But those who go out sowing in tears will reap with shouts of joy. Truly they will.

*'All good gifts around us are sent from heaven above'*

They are. Which means they don't belong by right to those who got to them first. They belong to all God's children.