

SERMON FOR ORDINARY SUNDAY 24C

ALL SAINTS BIRKENHEAD 2022

September the 9th will now go down in history as a significant day, the death of Queen Elizabeth the 2nd.

Today is also a significant date. September 11th. I wonder where you were on September 11 2001? I remember quite vividly being woken in the morning by my father telling us that America was under attack. We raced down to the TV screen and became glued to it for the next hour.

Fast forward 21 years, and we have had multiple terror attacks since then.

If we think about the disastrous 2nd war in Iraq in retaliation for the twin tower attacks, we quickly realise that vengeance is not always the answer, though it is often our first reaction. And the recent bungled US withdraw from Afghanistan.

We can't just blame victims for wanting retaliation. We have to all admit that we want justice, retaliation, punishment for those we see as doing wrong. I discover something I don't really like to admit. What I discover is that I actually do the same thing myself. I want justice, but I also want retaliation. I don't like it, but I know it is true. I also see it is true for many others too.

We all at some time in our lives kill off, figuratively speaking, those we do not like, those we find difficult, those who irritate us, those who disturb us. We separate them from our company, we put barriers up so they can't belong, we ignore their needs and hope the people will go away.

These are the ways we kill off certain people. Then we wonder why these people retaliate. Of course

sometimes the tables are turned and we are the ones on the outer, we are the ones others are trying to kill off. That's when we want to retaliate to. We find ways of hitting back, returning evil for evil, or holding a grudge against the perpetrators of this unkindness towards us. It seems that is a human condition, though not one we need to encourage. The difficulty is how to change the need to retaliate into a constructive way of bringing about justice so relationships can be restored.

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Today's gospel tells us that on an individual level, God doesn't retaliate but rather seeks ways to bring about a restoration of relationship. While God does not do away with justice, nor condone evil, there is always the desire to reconcile.

Jesus uses a very common experience to tell his hearers some important things about God. The first thing Jesus tells his hearers is about the

compassionate concern of a searching God. God is one who is willing to go in search of the lost. Look at the effort the shepherd and the woman expend in searching for the lost. What rejoicing there is too. Here is another aspect of the nature of God. God too will rejoice like the shepherd and the woman. These two people call in friends and neighbours to celebrate. They do not wish to be alone. It would very likely be true to say that the expense of the celebration would probably be more than the value of the lost sheep or the lost coin. So we begin to imagine the extravagance and joy of the occasion.

Perhaps this is an unusual picture of God – one who throws a celestial party, which the angels dare not miss. And isn't it a comforting picture. It makes us feel so much better about coming to God when we need support and help. We are told we don't have to wait to come to God, for God comes to search for us. We have no fear in being able to converse with a God like this.

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However, we do need to put these parables in their context. Jesus told them when all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to Jesus. And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, 'This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.' The parables were told as a disturbing response to these complaining Pharisees and Scribes. They couldn't cope with such a teacher who mixed with undesirables. The parables simply reinforce Jesus actions.

Both these stories give unusual images of God. In one God is likened to a shepherd. Shepherds had a notorious reputation. They were dirty, smelly, and were not always honest. They were usually avoided as outcasts. The other parable says God is like a woman and women were treated as second class citizens. Jesus was being very provocative in choosing these two images for his parable. It's as if Jesus is saying God is more like the outcast, than like those comfortably in power. The Pharisees and Scribes are beckoned to join Jesus in being like God, to be part of the searching out because that is the nature of God.

Very often I find myself like the Pharisees and Scribes. It's hard to welcome sinners. It's not easy to be kind to those who are not kind to us. It's not easy to even make contact with some of these people who today we would call outsiders. Sharing a meal with the down and outs, the prostitutes, the drug addicts, is not something we would do.

Nor is it something the people Jesus is talking with are comfortable about either. But Jesus shows his concern for the people neglected by society, the people on the fringe of society. We still need to find ways to show our concern for the outcasts of our day. Searching for the lost is still the concern of

those who follow Jesus. And it is still our concern to rejoice when one who is lost is found.

These twin parables are reminders to us of our need to keep working at being like our searching God. Perhaps we can be more like our searching God when we keep in mind that we have been sought out by God and God rejoices over us too. There are always times when we do something wrong, neglect our duty, act recklessly, or whatever it is we feel we have done that's wrong. And we come back to God looking for the pardon we believe we can receive. We come here week by week hoping to be welcomed with open arms, surrounded with God's love and acceptance, even though we may sometimes feel unworthy. We look for God's acceptance, and we look for the acceptance of others in the community.

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We may well ask "Is there someone who will rejoice at my presence here today?" That rejoicing over is something we need to do, and it's something we

need to remember. For when we know God rejoices over us, we are more likely to be able to rejoice when others come into our midst. We will also remember that our God is one who goes out to seek and save the lost. And that includes me.

So today's Gospel is one which gives us some important images of God and invites us to be like God. The God who goes out to seek and save the lost. And that includes me.