

Draw close to God and God will draw close to you

Fiona Gardiner, 9 Sept 2021

READINGS: James 3:13 – 4:3 & 7, 8a and Mark 9: 30 - 37

Here we are, Lord. All in the same boat! Gathered in worship; listening, hoping, trying to live together in the flow of your love. Teach us, we pray. Amen.

Have you ever found you're a bit lost: ask for directions! I'm sorry to disturb you, but I don't know my way to the nearest Tube station. Can you help me please?

How are you? How is coming here to church this morning/evening for you?

Uplifting? Challenging? Humbling? Inspiring?

Are we here for a blessing or a dressing down?

Or all of these all mixed up?

Why do we come to church?

Last week David used the image of us all being in the same boat as we journey on in faith together. Let's hold onto that image as we draw near to God together today and consider what happens when we meet as God's people.

In Mark's gospel we hear that Jesus has taken the disciples away on retreat as they travel from Galilee to Jerusalem. He has important things to teach them and they need to learn. One of these things is warning them in advance what will happen in Jerusalem: betrayal, death, resurrection. This is hugely important stuff.

But they didn't understand and were afraid to ask.

Afraid of his answer? Did they think he'd be annoyed at asking for clarification? Was it just too difficult and they shied away from any suggestion of danger or failure? Easier not to think about it, not to rock the discipleship boat by seeming to be just a bit at sea with all this.

Instead they argued about who would be the greatest among them: so much easier, so much more important!

But Jesus is not about to miss a lesson they can understand, so teaches about humility and service, about welcoming the young being the same as welcoming Jesus himself, welcoming the Father himself into our midst. I hope they understood that lesson better!

The apostle James says: Come near to God and He will come near to you. He writes about how important it is to nurture the right sort of wisdom in our lives, not the power-based, ambitious wisdom of the everyday world. Instead it's about being pure, considerate, impartial, sincere. Being

peacemakers, not arguing about unimportant things. Things like: Who's the best? The greatest? The holiest?

Some years ago I talked about one of my favourite novelists and how her main character has three rules for his team. They are encouraged to say:

I'm sorry. I don't know. I need help.

I've been struck afresh by how these questions actually help us to understand what is happening to us when we come to church.

We get the chance to say, together as God's people and individually as God's child in Christ: I'm sorry. I'm so sorry.

Confession, they say, is good for the soul.

It's certainly healthy for our emotional and mental well-being.

When we say our confession in Church, no-one, no human being is standing in judgement on any of us. After all, we are in the same boat: the raft of human frailty and self-centeredness.

We have come in humility before our Father in Heaven to confess our faults...it's is God's right to hear us and to render judgement.

Yet what does he do? Week on week, day by day, hour by hour He forgives as we confess.

Not just a grudging, 'Oh well, I'll let you off this time because I'm in a good mood,' but free, total, utter forgiveness. A clean slate. A fresh start. Through Jesus, because of Jesus, for the sake of Jesus and the gospel message of true reconciliation.

I'm sorry brings huge blessing and a lifting away of fear and failure, tears and trauma. Let's revel in such grace, such unearned love.

I don't know... The disciples decided not to admit to their failure to understand the important thing Jesus was teaching about his future in Jerusalem. What a mistake!

Jesus' time with his friends was rapidly running out. If we look forward in the gospel of Mark, we find the triumphal entry on the donkey only two chapters further on. The days of betrayal, death and the miracle of resurrection glory are only just round the corner. They should have tried to understand...it would have helped them with all the trauma they were about to face.

The words 'I don't know' shouldn't bring anger or judgement with them. It's not about being humiliated or embarrassed. Well, it shouldn't be.

'I don't know' is a gateway to learning. It expresses our need to find out and our willingness to learn. It opens the way to blessing.

The reading of God's word in Church, the preaching and teaching, hopefully help to turn 'I don't know' into 'I understand a little bit more'!

The heartening thing is that once again, we are all in the same boat, part of the same crew fumbling our way round the ropes and the sheets, the davits and the chains and wondering what

it's all about. Some of us are more seasoned sailors and can help newbies to learn. None of us knows it all: every day is a school day.

So it is with our Christian faith. We need to keep asking questions, exploring what we can't yet understand, delving deeper into God and his word. We can chat with others outside the service whether informally, in groups over coffee or in special times like Lent or Advent.

We none of us know it all, but let's share what we do know, and learn together new things, important things. That's how we'll grow in our faith and in our confidence, as individuals and as a Church.

Then we need to come to the 'I need help' bit. ***I need help.*** Let's pause here for a moment.

What do we need for the rest of today? For the week ahead? For our stumbling, questioning, growing faith? For the dark moments of doubt and illness? What do we need?

We need to be fed, filled, equipped, inspired. We need to come close to God. To commune with him. To cradle him in our hands, and feed on him in our hearts. We need those moments of the closest communion with the Lord as we remember His last supper, his sacrifice on the cross once, for all. We need to remember his death and his resurrection, for our sakes.

And at this point we none of us know the whys and wherefores, we just trust in the mystery of faith that through Holy Communion we are filled up and blessed and readied for the next part of the voyage together into the great unknown that we call the working week.

The Holy Spirit meets us in the love of God and the grace of the living Lord Jesus as we fall on our knees before him and gather at His table to be fed. Blessing. Mystery. Joy.

I'm sorry, I don't know, I need help: three little phrases that should accompany us through life and into all our relationships. Three handy building blocks.

Come near to God, writes St James, and God will come near to you. Let's be open, honest and willing to keep on admitting *I am sorry, I don't know, I need help.*

Lord, Father, Holy Spirit: as we draw near to you together, draw near to us, we pray.

Forgive us again.

Teach us new things and help us to follow you more closely as your people.

Fill us, inspire us, prepare us for all we will meet in the coming days.

Help us to be your people, living well together, for each other and those around us, and doing it in the deep, unending, unfathomable flow of your love. Amen.