**John 8:12-20**

**Learning to love ourselves**

There are so many contradictions within ourselves. It seems to me that we are constantly seeking to find out who we are as we exist in a sort of middle-ground between the spirit and the flesh. We know what we should be, but we seem unable to fulfil that, we know what we should do, but so often take another path. Paul speaks about this tension of contradictions in Romans 7: “I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want…I see in my body a law at war with the law of my mind…” That is the heart of our contradictions: a battle between body and mind; we know what we should be, but more often than not, we pursue another path…

And, of course, we very often beat ourselves up about our weaknesses and frailties. After all, that seems to be the experience of so many people of church, doesn’t it? Too many know that the church is supposed to be a place of grace but, in reality, it becomes a place where we are made to feel even worse about ourselves - perhaps even learn to hate ourselves. I heard that again recently when someone mentioned a friend who doesn’t come to church (not St. Andrew’s!) because, they said, they already feel bad enough about themselves and they don’t need the church to make them feel any worse. That is a damning indictment of what is supposed to be a place of grace…

Of course, the Christian gospel calls us to be realistic about ourselves and we don’t sit lightly to our weaknesses and our failings. But at the heart of the Christian gospel is the message that each one of you are very beautiful - and I am very beautiful - and God loves each one of us for who we are. He does not withhold his love until our contradictions are reconciled.

And how much better it would be if we could love ourselves as God loves us - because it is certainly my own personal experience, perhaps for some of you too, that I withhold loving myself because I hate my contradictions and therefore don’t feel worthy of love. And then, worst of all, I project my sense of self-loathing on to God and assume that he loathes me too because of my contradictions.

It is for me, and perhaps for some of you, a real battle to feel truly loved by God. Not because I do not believe that God loves me but because I project my own negative emotions onto him: if I see myself in one particular way, he must see me like that too.

But the truth is so different. It is so, so different.

And the journey we make through life is, in no small part, a journey out of the darkness of self-criticism and into the light of the acceptance of God.

And, in a sense, that’s what brings us to this story about Jesus’ self-declaration as the Light of the World. It’s a well-known saying, possibly one of the most well-known sayings of Jesus in Scripture, but we don’t often think about the context of it.

It’s not immediately obvious where Jesus was when this dialogue happened because the passage that immediately precedes it, John 8:1-8, wasn’t in the original manuscripts of the Bible and seems to have been somewhat randomly plonked in there, breaking up a longer conversation that runs through John 7 and John 8. So bearing that in mind, we can locate this conversation to the Temple in Jerusalem.

And it was not any ordinary day, either. Jesus was visiting the Temple for the Feast of Tabernacles. This was a major Feast of celebration that lasted seven days. It was a noisy festival, seven days of music and dancing and eating and singing, so don’t have the idea that Jesus is whispering this “I am” saying in serious, hushed tones in the quiet of an upper room somewhere. He was probably in the Court of the Women in the Temple, in the midst of the celebrations, and probably had to shout above all the noise to be heard.

On the first day of the Festival, late in the evening, everyone descended on the Court of the Women where huge golden lamps were hanging. These lamps were so huge, the wicks to burn them were made from the old trousers of the priests of the Temple. We are talking big lamps, shedding a lot of light…And as the cymbals crashed and the psalms were sung and the dancing continued, the lamps were lit and it is said in the historical documents that the whole Temple and beyond was lit by the light of the lamps.

So here is Jesus, sitting in the blazing light, surrounded by literally hundreds of partying people

a cacophony of noise, the smell of oil, dancing, shouting and laughing all around. And in the midst of all that human activity, Jesus goes over to the religious leaders and shouts in their ear in the same way that you have to shout to be heard at a party: “I am the light of the world; he who follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life.”

This crazy Galilean carpenter was at it again…

Didn’t he have any respect for the Festival? Or was he just completely delusional?

But no, Jesus was deadly serious. “I am the light of the world; he who follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life.”

The metaphor of light was deeply embedded in the Jewish spiritual tradition, and not just through the Feast of Tabernacles. It would be tedious to go through all the references in the Old Testament to the idea of God being the one who shines light into the lives of the believers. But there are two particular verses that are of specific importance…

The first is Exodus 13:21-22. This is the story of the Exodus from Egypt, as the people of Israel

were journeying out of captivity and slavery into the Promised Land of God. And as we know only too well ourselves the journey from spiritual captivity into freedom in God is not one we can make ourselves without the guidance of God himself. So we read in Exodus 13: “And the Lord went before them by day in a pillar of cloud to lead them along the way, and by night in a pillar of fire to give them light, that they might travel by day and by night.” Here is a beautiful metaphor of God leading us as we journey through life. As the people of Israel wrestled with their own contradictions being the chosen people of God yet experiencing the bitterness of captivity God, by his light, will lead them into a new and better future. The light of God leading us gives us hope for this life, as we struggle with our contradictions.

But there is another verse of particular importance too, which is Zechariah 14:7. And here, the prophet describes what it will be like on the Day of the Lord when all things are drawn to him. And in beautifully poetic language we read this: “And there shall be continuous day, not day and not night, for at evening time there shall be light.” Again, a lovely metaphor describing the reality that God’s light will never be put out of our lives. His guiding care is an eternal reality just as much as a temporal reality in the here and now and in eternity, the light of God shines so powerfully in us that, there, all our contradictions are finally resolved.

But the Pharisees who were listening to Jesus just didn’t get the point of what he was saying. And they challenge him on his claim in verse 13: “You are bearing witness to yourself; your testimony is not true”. Here they are referring to the Law of Moses, where two witnesses were required to make any claim have a legitimate, legal base.

But Jesus replies with such a beautiful phrase that I want us to hang on to this morning in the midst of all the struggles we have with our contradictions. Jesus says this: “You judge according to the flesh. I judge no-one”.

The Pharisees had heard the words of Jesus, and they looked at this Galilean carpenter who, it seemed, had developed some sort of Messiah Complex. And they judged what they saw. They looked at all the contradictions that stood before them: a carpenter come religious teacher, a man building a spiritual family, yet himself of uncertain birth, a gentle and kind man who was not afraid to challenge politicians and religious leaders…They looked at Jesus Christ, a bundle of contradictions - and they judged him. They judged what they saw – they judged him according to the flesh.

And we so quickly fall into that Pharisaical position when we consider our own contradictions: The desire to be holy, but the weakness of the flesh. The knowledge that we should love a certain person, but we can’t help resenting them instead. The longing to be able to forgive that person who hurt us so badly in the past and yet fully aware that we can’t let go of the anger, the hurt, even the hate…

We consider our own contradictions, and we judge ourselves according to the flesh and we come to one conclusion: “I am false”. In the light of all my contradictions, I judge myself and say, “I am a bad person, I am a fraud, I am a fake as a human being and a Christian”.

But that is the way of the Pharisees, who judge by the flesh and judge by the contradictions. But that is not the way of Christ. Jesus looks at the Pharisees and he simply says: “You judge according to the flesh. I judge no-one”.

Christ sees their contradictions and he does not judge.

Christ sees his own contradictions and he does not judge.

Christ sees my contradictions and he does not judge.

Christ sees your contradictions and he does not judge.

He knows you for who you are. He knows that for every weakness, you have a strength and a desire to succeed. He knows that for every wrong thing you have done, you have a spirit of regret. He knows that for all the guilt you carry, you have a deep need for peace and healing.

Jesus knows you – and he does not judge.

Rather than carrying in our being the judgemental nature of the Pharisees through which we give ourselves such a hard time, perhaps we need to develop more of the grace and compassion of Jesus, who does not judge according to the flesh.

It is often easier for us to have compassion on others than it is for us to have compassion on ourselves.

But Jesus, the Light of the World, meets us with compassion and grace, even when we feel lost in our own contradictions - and he does not judge. So, if want to mirror Christ in our own lives, we could do worse than starting by not judging ourselves; by trying to love ourselves a little bit more and not condemning ourselves for our failings.

The truth is that all of us are on a journey – a journey into the light of the world. We are somewhere between the Exodus from captivity and the eternal light of the Day of the Lord. Contradiction and tension are part of the sign of the times in which we live. And since we have not yet reached the eternal light of the Day of the Lord, it is not surprising that, on occasion, we move out of the light. That is not to excuse our contradictions or to give ourselves permission to feed them. But only to say that when we find ourselves lost in those contradictions, we should recognise them for what they are: part and parcel of the journey towards the light - and not judge ourselves or condemn ourselves, because even Jesus does not do that…

And as we journey into God’s future together, we are guided by the Light of the World who does not judge but loves us with an everlasting love.

Soon enough, the Day of the Lord will come and all our contradictions will be resolved into God. Until then, we live with the tensions we experience between body and mind and, to the best of our frail ability, we fix our eyes on the light of the world and we follow where he leads. We will stumble. We will fall. But the Light of the World has strong arms and he will pick us up and take us forward at the pace we can handle.

“I am the Light of the World. He who follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life”.