

Readings: Isaiah 50:4-9a, Psalm 118:1-2, 19-29, Philippians 2:5-11, Matthew 21:1-11

Imitating Whom and What?

Introduction

Earlier in this service, we heard the words of Milan Kundera, a Czech-French poet and writer; *"Our historical experience teaches us that people imitate one another, that their attitudes are statistically calculable, their opinions manipulable, and that they are less individuals (a subject) than an element in a mass."*

In my experience, mimesis, imitating, copying, determines how we are perceived, how we are interpreted by others, and ultimately how we perceive and interpret ourselves. This holds, I suggest, in work places, in communities, and in societies, as a whole.

Call the Midwife.

In our film clip a few minutes ago, we see the power of mimesis, the way in which community dynamics tend to work. Within Poplar in the East End, to belong, to be part of the community, means that one must be mainstream working class: not Irish working class, much less, sexually ambiguous or attached to someone who is sexual ambiguous. The story plays off these two groups, the Irish and the sexually ambiguous, with the rat infestation that Poplar is suffering, implying that they are as rats: contaminants of the local community. Within this drama, a number of issues scream out: first, the unity, the coherence of the community is decided as much by what and whom they exclude, as by what or whom they include. Second, this identification of common enemies, outsiders, helps in ensuring that those within the community don't turn upon each other, as they compete with each other for the few scarce resources that exist in post war Poplar: jobs, money and social opportunities. Common fear and hatred felt toward another deemed outside the gate, binds the community within the gate, as little else can. Third, there is a sort of mythology working within this community: a sort of moral mythology that subscribes to the idea that these people, the Irish and the sexually ambiguous, mark, diminish, harm the community; that only their expulsion can ensure its safety, its well-being, its security. These people are the scapegoats.

But there is something else that is going on here as well: there is another force in play, a countervailing force. It is that force that through the efforts of Nurse Phyllis and the GP, Dr Turner, the dangerous Irish family is found a public flat; and even more dramatically, as Marie is barred from playing her legitimate role in the Rose Queen Ceremony, feisty Nurse Trixie, one who is not altogether of a 'religious' bent, declares the Gospel, "Didn't Jesus teach us to forgive even the sinners...and looking for priestly backup...Tom"? "especially the sinners". In these few words, the question is asked of the people: *who do you imitate: the community or Jesus. Who will you follow, the community or Jesus?*

The point is this: in imitating the community, the model for peace arises from all the divergent antagonisms that converge upon the Irish or upon Tony and Marie. In imitating Jesus, the model for peace arises from the one who forgives, includes, embraces. In imitating the community, Poplar is made up of them and us. In imitating Jesus, Poplar is made up of only us.

The Gospel

What has this to do with Palm Sunday? Palm Sunday and Holy Week are all about peace and peaceable-ness and how to achieve it. The clue is in the crowd and its responses. In our Palm Sunday reading, the crowd that accompanies Jesus, enthusiastically welcomes him. It

is not entirely clear whether they understand who they really welcome, although it does appear that they get that he constitutes a challenge to the Temple System and Rome. But if we keep reading and focus upon the alternate Gospel text for today, the text for Passion Sunday (Matthew 26&27), we find that the crowd has turned; that in one way or another, they have been persuaded, come to the conclusion, that Jesus represents a danger, a threat. In fact, it is not just the crowd as such, although the disaffection with Jesus begins there. What we find is that through a process of political and theological osmosis, it is the crowd that gradually influences the leaders, including Pilate. John's Gospel is especially insistent on this, as in his rendition, Pilate's wife urges her husband to resist the crowd, but he cannot. Jesus, becomes, no, the stakes are higher than that, *God becomes the scapegoat*. **The story of Easter is not that God is on the side of the victim, of the homeless Irish, of Tony and Marie...but more controversially, more scandalously, that God is the homeless Irish, God is Tony and Marie.**

But if that is the case: what does it mean to imitate Jesus, rather than the crowd, rather than the community? It means to understand, that social and political engagement is an expression of self-emptying. Rowan Williams, puts it like this: "Community, society begins where I am dispossessed of my attachment to my own interests, where I accept responsibility for the interests of others". To merely tolerate others in their difference, the new liberal secular mode of existence, is not enough. To imitate Jesus, is to see a broader picture, that *actively* includes. That is the only path to a meaningful peace. Christians, avers Rowan Williams, are not just one interest group alongside others., but a community whose only interest must be the interest of all.

Who and what are we willing to imitate?