

EPIPHANY 4: 2024

When I got home to the Rectory after Church last week, we had another power cut and about lunchtime I was getting a little worried. My sermon for the afternoon Unity service was on my computer and with no power, no sermon! Liz kept saying you need a 'Plan B' and I found one. It was an article by Brother Charlie in the latest Mirfield 'CR Review' about a recent religious and ecumenical conference he had enjoyed in Sweden. On their last day, this very mixed group of monks and nuns travelled to the beautiful town of Vadstena, to see the Abbey Church where St Bridget founded her Order and where she received a number of her remarkable visions. It was here, brother Charlie tells us, that Ingrid, their Lutheran host celebrated the Eucharist, assisted by sisters from the three Swedish Lutheran communities represented which, he said, was wonderful. Walking around the church he was intrigued by a strange object which appeared to be attached to the side of the pulpit. On closer inspection it proved to be an egg timer to keep the preacher in check. Apparently these are quite common in Lutheran churches in Sweden. "I ventured the opinion", said Br.Charlie, "that there were a number of parishes in the UK that would be grateful for something similar."

Fortunately the power did come back on last week so I couldn't tell that particular story, and probably just as well!

But thinking and reflecting on today's Gospel episode, there must have been some pandemonium there; while people

were drawn to Jesus's teaching and wise words, suddenly the mood changes and people must have felt shocked, annoyed even, that this deranged man should disturb their sense of peace in this way. He shouts out, "What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth?"

I am fascinated by that question aren't you? And that it comes from someone who instinctively knew there was something serious and attractive about this itinerant preacher. Yet he would have carried the label or burden of being 'mentally ill'.

Perhaps we can imagine ourselves in that congregation that day. We bring all our knowledge and feelings, hopes and fears with us and the unnamed enemy within us who is preventing us from being fully ourselves. Do we hear Jesus say to our own demons, "Be silent, and come out"?

All of us, preachers included, need assurance still that this same Christ is someone we can trust and rely on to help us, someone who can teach us and reassure us of God's love, forgiveness and acceptance.

However hard it is to be a Christian, we need to find room in our hearts, minds and souls to let this Christ speak to us and renew us - without pointing the finger at someone else who upsets us, disagrees with us, or disturbs us. My own experience of working alongside people with mental health issues, is that they can persist in asking us the difficult questions or the ones we seek not to answer.

In this Gospel encounter, the egg timer truly goes off, and unsettles us. But Christ calmly reaches out to all for inner healing. He wants us to be part of our own, revealing Epiphany stories, whereby our lives are inspired by community, by compassion, and strengthened around God's altar of friendship and inclusivity.

Our own homes too, are such places of welcome, when we invite strangers in as well as family, when we share food and fellowship. And in our living rooms, listening is just as important as speaking and even more so when Christ is our host doing the inviting. Around the hearth, He sparks in us words of new life and we want to hear them, receive them, and 'tarry awhile'.

'What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth?' A great deal more, I suggest, than any number of words or sermons.

Amen.