

Introduction

When I worked in Hackney I ran a support Group for non-documented migrant women; those who had no right to remain in the UK and who led very precarious lives. Early on in the project we realised how very little they had and how hungry the women were because they gave what they had to their children. We tried to give them food and clothes whenever we could but in the beginning I was horrified at the way they would snatch and grab at things. But they did it for survival. They did not know where their next meal would come from and they grabbed what they could for their children and themselves.

Our circumstances shape who we are and how we behave. If we have loving reliable parents who have shown that they care for us we have no concerns about being looked after and simply trust them to provide for us.

If our parents show themselves not to be trustworthy then we will be suspicious and grab things for ourselves. This truth applies to both our readings today. Jesus is telling the disciples that they don't need to worry about their status and honour because God can be trusted to honour those who serve him. He encourages them to focus on heavenly priorities because our God can be trusted to honour us. And in the epistle the writer to the Hebrews makes the point that God has promised he will never leave us or forsake us and therefore our behaviour as Christians can reflect that security and certainty.

Hebrews 13:1-8, 15-16

Luke 14:1, 7-14

At first glance the list of instructions in the last chapter of this letter appear to be disconnected and unrelated – the sort of last minute instructions parents might give to teenage children as they go away for a few days. “Don’t forget to feed the cat. Put the rubbish out on Thursday”. But in fact these instructions all have their root in one thing – the fact that the readers of the letter are Christians. They follow a God who has told them that he will never leave them or forsake them and that he is their helper. It is on this basis that the writer is encouraging Christian behaviour and outlining how we as Christians should be living.

Who, then, is the God who gives us security? He promised his people in Deuteronomy “Never will I leave you, never will I forsake you.” - this is the God who had heard the distressed cries of his people in slavery, who had persuaded their oppressors to let them go and who led them out of Egypt. This is the God who travelled through the desert with them, who put up with their grumbling and doubts and who provided food for them every day they were in the desert. This is the God who forgave their sin and failure and gave them second chances and this is the God who healed their diseases and ensured that their clothes did not wear out on their travels.

This is the God who gives us security. He has shown himself to be committed to his people and unable to leave them even when they behave badly. This is the God who can be trusted to provide for our needs so that we can use our energies in living holy lives and putting other people’s need first.

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The psalmist, quoted in verse 6 knows he is safe because when he was hard pressed and troubled God rescued him and brought him to safety. He knows that God protects him and so he fears nothing that humans can do to him. This sort of security – where we are certain that God will protect us from harm enables us to be vulnerable to others, to lower our guard, to love others and to be generous to them. We can do this because we know ourselves to be on safe ground. The knowledge that we are loved and protected enables us to live our lives to the full and to share God love and goodness with others. Knowing ourselves secure in God gives us the freedom to live as he called us to, to love one another as brothers and sisters, because we are, after all, family.

Though, I can hear you saying, as I know I would also say “Huh, my sister/brother and I fought like cat and dog. And what about sibling rivalry, we were always competing against each other, for the best seat, most food, my parents’ attention? Is that a model for love?

Yes that is true. It certainly was in my family. As children we fought and argued and teased each other. It was part of our growing process. We were and still are very different and that can cause tension. We did compete a lot but we gradually learned our place within the family and that each of us was loved and valued and that each of us was good in our own field so we stopped competing and began to value each other.

It is also true that if I am in a tight fix the two people I can go to without hesitation for help are my brother and sister. We don’t see a lot of each other and we

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know we are very different but let one of us be in trouble and the others will unquestioningly be there to help.

Back in the mid-eighties when we didn't have the highly developed communications we have today I worked as a Nanny in St John's wood. My charge's parents went on a Nile Cruise and while they were away the little boy became very seriously ill. We spent a week in St Mary's Hospital Paddington. I was desperate to contact his parents and didn't know what to do. Then I thought: " My brother will be able to do it". He worked in the city and I thought he'd know how to contact Crocodile Island on the River Nile. Sure enough; He not only got a telex off straight away but he refused to let me pay for it. It is the shared experiences and mutual understanding of siblings that enables us to give unquestioning love and support to each other when we need it. We see it now my mother is frail and we work as a team to care for her.

That is the priceless bond we have as Christians. Even in a strange city when we meet our brothers and sisters in Christ there is that mutual background and shared understanding that enables us to give an unhesitating welcome and support to each other

It is when we have confidence that our needs will be provided for that we are able to be generous to others. We know that we have a loving God who has proved himself faithful in all circumstances so we are able to be free to share what we have with others. It is a strange fact but it is often those who have least, who

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know what it is like to struggle, who are most generous with what they have.

It is also true that when we meet with strangers we never know who we may be serving. Abraham entertained angels unawares and when we meet with people, especially those in need we can learn from Mother Theresa who believed that in caring for the poorest most revolting beggar she was caring for Jesus. We are all created in God's image and our Lord calls us to welcome everyone as if it were himself.

Welcoming others into our church and our homes isn't always easy but it benefits us as much as it benefits them. Can I encourage you to look out for strangers in our midst and take time to welcome them. You can talk to your friends anytime – if we ignore them this might be the only time a stranger will come into our church.

I think it is easy for us to think of ourselves as friendly churches – because we are small and all know each other. But that very smallness and the tightknit nature of our relationships can be very daunting to newcomers. We need to work on seeking people out and being friendly to them. I am very encouraged at the way we welcome children into our churches despite the fact that they can be restless. That is how it should be because as Christians we are to be hospitable

The people who God calls us to show love and respect to are the weakest and most vulnerable. The widow, the orphan, the refugee, the prisoner – even if they

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deserve their sentence God is concerned that they should come to know his forgiveness and renewal.

All of these exhortations are based on the security and self-esteem that we find from the God who loves us, is with us always and helps us in every situation. So much of the promiscuity and relationship breakdown we see in our society is due to people's low self-esteem, a need to find love and mistaking sex for love. I have seen members of my family and some of my closest friends going through difficulties in their marriages. In all cases it was because one partner wasn't secure in themselves or in the relationship. They suddenly felt the need for something more and went looking for sexual encounters that would make them feel good and build up their self-confidence. – It didn't work and they found out the hard way. It is as we know ourselves perfectly loved by God that we can respect ourselves and our relationship and also respect other people's relationships

Jesus made it clear to the Pharisee that there is a place for everyone in God's Kingdom. We don't need to look out for our own interests or to put ourselves forward because we belong and we all have our place. If we are trying to grab honour for ourselves we may be humiliated.

The heart of the effective Christian life is the knowledge that we are loved and accepted through the love and sacrifice of Jesus Christ. It is because he values and loves us that he died for us. With that sort of proof of love we should all be totally secure and able to live joyful, effective Christian lives. Of course, many

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of us still struggle with insecurity and fear in our lives but it is through Jesus Christ and all that he won for us on the cross that we are able to conquer our fear and shame and to embrace the freedom that Jesus won for us at such cost to him.

It is through him that we are able to praise God and to bring him thanks for all that he has done for us and all he is doing in our lives. The Christian life is a process of change, a journey of liberation and commitment. It is as we bring our fears and weakness to him that he is able to reassure us of his total commitment to us and his ability to transform our lives to show his love to all we live amongst; so that our acts of goodness will proclaim God for all to see.