

## **SERMON – Rev Anne Taylor**

I am going to start this sermon by saying Bogof!

No, I'm not trying to be rude so take your hand away from the off button I am simply using the acronym for Buy One and Get One Free!

You might think that getting an extra item free with a purchase is something new in supermarkets, but it's as old as the Gospels!

In today's Gospel Jesus says, "Are not two sparrows sold for a penny?" In the corresponding passage from Luke it's given "Are not 5 sparrows sold for 2 pennies?" Two a penny, 5 for 2p! A sort of Buy One and Get One Free!

Now sparrows were as cheap as chips, and when the poor couldn't offer a sheep for sacrifice they could offer birds instead, and the cheapest of all were sparrows.

And the point Jesus is making is that even the most lowly, the most humble, the most overlooked by others, are loved and cared for by God, even the extra sparrow in a 1st century BOGOF.

On one occasion when people were pressing in on Jesus as he travelled to Capernaum, a woman with a haemorrhage slipped through the crowd to touch the hem of Jesus' clothes in order to find healing. And even though nobody else seemed to notice her, Jesus did and he turned to her with a word of healing and encouragement.

Nobody gets lost in the crowd with Jesus. In these times nobody gets forgotten in isolation.

And it has always been.

In the Old Testament book of Judges we read how the Israelites were being overrun and oppressed by the Midianites. The Israelites called out to God for help and relief. God did act, but not by choosing one of the existing leaders. Instead he sent an angel to a young man called Gideon telling him that he was God's chosen instrument to free his people.

And this is how Gideon responded, "How can I deliver Israel. My clan is the weakest and I am the least in my family."

But God doesn't look on outward status and position. He has his own way into everyone's heart. Just because we may think we are insignificant doesn't mean that God can't or won't use us for his purposes.

Commenting on the call of Gideon, one writer has said "God sent an angel to tell a nobody that he was indeed a somebody in God's sight." (Larry Keefauver)

That's the way God is. He uses those who are small in their own eyes to do great things and even extraordinary things.

Gideon saw himself as weak and helpless. But God told the angel to address Gideon as "Mighty man of valour."

On another occasion, the disciples, out of earshot of Jesus, were arguing amongst themselves about who was the greatest. Happens in so many human organisations and groups. But Jesus knew what was going on and he sat them down. Then he placed a child in their midst and said, "Whoever welcomes one such child welcomes me."

The least, the smallest, the seemingly insignificant are only important to God. God can be seen most truly not in the brash but in the humble.

In God's kingdom the first shall be last and the last shall be first.

As Barbara Brown Taylor, the American priest has put it, "In the topsy-turvy kingdom of God, the most unlikely people are the most likely to be agents of God."

But that's not the only message of today's Gospel. As usual, as well as comforting the afflicted, Jesus also afflicts the comfortable. He ends with a challenge, "Everyone therefore who acknowledges me before others, I also will acknowledge before my Father in heaven; but whoever denies me before others I also will deny before my Father in heaven." Strong words.

And for many Christians in the early centuries of church persecution martyrdom was a real and present danger. To acknowledge Jesus was literally a matter of life and death, and for many the only way to avoid either hanging or burning was to deny Jesus and to acknowledge the divinity of the Roman emperor.

Which many, to their great credit, refused to do.

As we live out our lives as Christians today we are more likely to face apathy than attack, ridicule rather than the rack, but we are still challenged to be true to our Christian beliefs, and I believe that it is by our actions as much as our words that we will acknowledge Jesus and show we are true to him. For it is still true as Ralph Waldo Emerson once said, "I can't hear what you are saying because your actions are shouting so loudly."

Jack Burton, a Methodist minister once wrote "If as Christians we are out-loved by those who profess no faith in Christ, then our discipleship is seriously questioned."

In the past months so many have put good intentions into action – the group in the local Gild Hall making 910 sets of scrubs for local hospitals, the amazing amount that has been given for our Foodbank collection, all the many phone calls to let someone know they are not forgotten, the shopping trips, the prayers for others said at our Cross of Hope in the churchyard and so much more.

It is so important that we get involved in action groups that support the vulnerable and the lonely, be actively involved in our Uganda project, work for social justice and care for the environment. Acknowledge how important campaigns like Black Lives Matter really are in heightening awareness and defeating complacency.

Actions speak louder than words but words are also important. A Jewish proverb says, "Many have fallen by the sword, but not as many as have fallen by the tongue!" Words can heal or words can wound.

Two chapters on Jesus said, "Out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks", and concluded "by your words you will be justified and by your words you will be condemned."

Words are important – the words of kindness and care, the words of appreciation and thanks, the words of forgiveness and reconciliation, words that build up rather than tear down. And let's remember the gentle but firm words that refuse to give silent assent to what is wrong, unjust or dishonest.

Today's Gospel offers us both comfort and challenge.

Comfort in the fact that no matter how we write ourselves off as insignificant, God says that everybody is a somebody.

Challenge in word and deed to show love for others in the same way that we are loved by God.

So may God give us grace to be not only hearers but doers of his holy word; not only to profess but to practice our faith; not only to love but also to live the Gospel and so acknowledge Jesus as our Lord and God. Amen.