

Sermon: A Bear Stranger – 3rd January 2021

Prayer:

Heavenly Father, we pray that these words will speak to us here today, and will serve to glorify your name, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Sometimes, I like to start my sermon with a short story, so here's one that I hope you will enjoy.

A policeman who was patrolling the streets of London saw a man in a car, with a small bear sat in the front seat. He stopped the car and asked the man, "What are you doing with that bear in your car? You should take it to the zoo." A few days later, the same policeman saw the same man with the bear sat in the front seat of his sports car; both of them wearing sunglasses. The policeman pulled him over and said "I thought you were going to take that bear to the zoo!" The man replied, "I did and we had such a good time, we decided to go to the beach today!" I know – terrible wasn't it; but – bear with me, it does get better.

Linda and I were recently reunited with a little friend who reminded us of the village Christmas Bazaar some years ago. I'm sure we all missed the Christmas Bazaar last year, but we know why it had to be suspended and I'm not going to dwell on that matter today. Here's my little friend.

Linda won him in the bazaar raffle, I hope you recognise him – yes, this is Paddington Bear. He was made by Hazel Ross. Some of you may remember Colin and Hazel who lived in the village some years ago and were very active in St James Church. The more knowledgeable and observant among you will have spotted that Paddington is wearing – a yellow hat. His customary red one was blown off and lost on a windy day, so he's wearing his spare one. The colour has nothing to do with Hazel running out of red wool!

Now – this bear is actually a thespian of great renown; he's starred in films and numerous TV programmes over the years. Michael Bond, who created him in 1958, says the inspiration for him came from seeing Jewish evacuee children pass through Reading station from London during the Kindertransport programme of the late 1930s. They all had a label round their neck, with their name and address on it and a little case or package containing all their treasured possessions; and so, Paddington, in his blue duffle coat and distinctively shaped hat, has a label attached to his coat. It says "From darkest Peru, to London England, via Paddington Station; and on the back it has a simple request: 'Please look after this bear. Thank you'.

The story goes that Paddington's aunty sent him from Peru to London, because life was very tough in Peru, especially for bears. By the way – Paddington felt rather nostalgic when he heard us saying the Peruvian Gloria earlier! It reminded him of his home far away – but let's get back to his story. Paddington's aunty said, "The people of London won't have forgotten how to give strangers a warm welcome". What actually happens is that when Paddington gets into the train station he is pushed and jostled by the crowds, ignored by everyone and left by himself, lonely, hungry and frightened – ahh. Then Mr and Mrs Brown spot him and take him home where he becomes part of their rather chaotic family. When Paddington realises that his beloved marmalade sandwiches have never tasted better, he knows that he has at last found a happy 'home'.

Well, that was a much better bear story than the first one wasn't it! But you may be wondering what all this bear talk has got to do with today's service? Well, I hope you will soon see the relevance.

The foundation of the Christian faith is, of course, the story of Jesus Christ, but throughout his life Jesus had a very tough time. From the start, when Herod saw the baby Jesus as a threat to his sovereignty and searched him out to kill him, until Jesus was publicly crucified thirty something years later, he remained a stranger to all who thought they knew him. He was a stranger in the sense that he didn't fit any expectations of what God's Messiah should look like. He was born to an unmarried mother in an animal barn, visited by rough, smelly shepherds from the fields and by mystical characters from eastern lands; and he was a child refugee in Egypt before returning to live in the obscure village of Nazareth.

Later, as a preacher his first sermon didn't go down well, and over his three-year public ministry he disturbed the establishment by saying that God is more evident in the social outcasts and untouchables, than in the religiously observant, or rich and powerful. He was a stranger too in that he seemed to question people's answers more than answer their questions, and even his closest family and friends constantly misunderstood him.

At his trial, when Peter stood in the forecourt and denied knowing Jesus as the cock crowed, Peter was lying; but in another sense, he was telling the truth. Peter didn't really know Jesus at that time. The place Jesus kept calling the kingdom was somehow reassuring but distant, confusing, allusive; and how could he possibly be the 'Son of God'? 'He was in the world yet the world did not know him. He came to what was his own and he was not accepted'.

The stories Jesus told and the encounters he had, reveal to us how we project our fears onto people, often people who can't speak out or strike back, those who are vulnerable in some way; and how we become tribal, liking our own types and pointing the finger at others, and – oh how convenient – that God is always on the side of our tribe. Jesus constantly exposed this fallacy for what it is – teaching and living to show that all who don't or can't conform to what is considered normal – are loved and treasured by God equally and forever.

Through this teaching we know that whenever we use language that demeans, whenever we act in ways that exclude, and make rules that oppress, whenever we force or bully people to live down to our low expectations of them rather than live up to the dignity entitled to them as children of God – we have strayed from his way of love and wandered off the Christian path.

Sadly, we live in times when strangers are more and more becoming the enemy. They are recognised by their unfamiliar clothes and hair style, different coloured skin, different language or accent, being old or disabled, having unconventional sexuality, or beliefs and thoughts that don't conform to ours. It happens in all places and at all levels; in homes, schools, work, politics, religion, between cultures and nations. It happens in you and in me.

The world badly needs human hearts that see dignity before money, and a person's needs before appearance or place of birth. What will injure the stranger amongst us more than the words of their enemies will be the silence of their friends.

So, to be true followers of Christ we must work hard in our hearts, in our communities, and on our leaders and politicians to be courageous enough and big enough to welcome the stranger. And the more we give the more we receive because that stranger may show us things that we never knew.

I said at the start of this service that the theme of the Epiphany Season is the revelation of Jesus Christ to all humanity, as the Son of God. That first revelation was 2000 years ago, but we are still learning and have a long way to go before we can, if ever, say that we fully understand the true nature of Jesus. But God is love, therefore Jesus is love, and in this world of uncertainty, one of the things of which we can be certain is that – we can never recognise Christians by their vestments, doctrine or certainty – but by the way they follow the example of Jesus – Christians are recognized through their acts of love.

Like Paddington Bear, each and every one of us here, each and every one of us in this world, has a sign around our neck asking that you please look after us because we are fragile, we bruise easily, we are a bit scared and sometimes lonely, we need friends to help us through this life.

At the end of the Paddington Bear film Mr Brown is putting someone right about the bear: he says 'It doesn't matter that he comes from the other side of the world. It doesn't matter that he's a different species or that he has a worrying addiction – to marmalade sandwiches – we love him. And Paddington realises that the Browns need him every bit as much as he needs them, and that's the way it's going to be.

Please look after the strangers: for what you do to the least of these, you do also to me.

Come on Paddington, I fancy a marmalade sandwich too, but you'll have to wait till the service has ended.