

Holy Communion at St John and St Stephen's Reading. 20.08.23, 11th Sunday after Trinity (Year A).

Matthew 15:10-28

"The person inside".

At 11am this morning, the Women's Football World Cup final kicked off, featuring Spain v. England. It's not often I use a football illustration in a sermon, but this year it feels a bit different.

My interest has been aroused not just by the fortunes of the Lionesses, as the England women are called, but also because of the Apple TV show *Ted Lasso*, which features a successful coach of American Football who moves from the US to London to coach an English team without having any prior knowledge of English football. But he is a very nice person.

So we begin with the deeply theological question: what makes a successful football team?

Before, had I been asked this question, I probably would've answered: *skilful players and scoring goals*. I might also have said that money has a lot to do with sporting success. And those things might still be true.

But this year, after having been exposed to women's football, and a football related Drama, I might well answer that it depends a lot on the inner qualities of the coach. And by that I mean the sort of values they embody and how they treat the members of the team. It's more about character, I might answer. It might even be about goodness.

Alex Scott, commentating on the success of the English women's team said this of the Lionesses' coach, Sarina Wiegman: "We've been looking for a manager like her for a long time." The specific qualities that Sarina has brought, the things that have made the England women's team so successful, according to Scott, are "communication and togetherness" and she added: "Sarina's just a genuinely lovely person".

Similarly, Ted Lasso – despite knowing nothing of the English Game, and being seen as something of a buffoon by the English supporters - is a man who is unnervingly, simple-heartedly good.

As the drama develops, he doesn't lose heart when people are deriding him and the club's been relegated. He doesn't lose heart when they have a lengthy series of draws and there's all sorts of conflict in the locker room. When eventually they

finally start to win matches and turn their fortunes around it's all due to the work he's done in uniting the team and modelling good behaviour and good relationships.

His inner qualities, largely invisible from the outside, prove to be of primary significance. These include not being reactive; not speaking ill of people who've got it in for him; offering forgiveness and always giving even the meanest person a second chance. He wants to bring out the best in his young players, and it's through his inner demeanour that he manages to achieve this.

It's an approach that I think Jesus would approve of.

In our passage Jesus has no time for the outward purity behaviours of the pharisees who've been criticising his disciples for not washing their hands before eating. According to the Pharisees, the disciples thus defile themselves before God.

Jesus has no time for this mismatch of outward purity and inward judgmentalism. It's not what you put in your mouth that interests God - but what comes out of your mouth, because of its origin in the heart. It's our internal qualities that God shines a light on. And it is those that we are invited to consider, with honesty and humility.

I think we instinctively know when someone's outer demeanour doesn't match what's inside – but it's hard to pin it down sometimes. It's probably a good thing when we notice that someone isn't aligned – it can be a defence against being duped. We probably need to worry when societies lose this ability – and it might already be happening: Chris Arnade, writing in the online magazine *Unherd* about American public life has said: 'here in the US at a spiritual level, we are becoming a thin culture, obsessed with the surface, more and more in denial about the importance of what is beneath' (quoted in *Church Times*, 14.08.23).

I can think of times when I've heard politicians being asked searching questions that, for whatever reason, they seem unable or unwilling to answer. They are usually questions of painful significance to many in society. They almost never answer the question directly. They give answers that roll off the tongue, that are pre-prepared. It's almost a definition of leadership that you can't say what's really going on – you have to give the official answer. But it can create the impression of a big mismatch between what a leader says and what's really going on.

So, a stock political answer is, 'this year we've invested as never before in education'; or: 'we're committed to net zero by 2030'; or – my favourite – gleaned from The Independent: 'I have been very clear that we are conducting an urgent review based on the best independent advice and will ramp up action at pace and at scale as soon as is practically possible'.

In the past few years, the gap between how people are outwardly in public life and how they are inwardly (which often leaks out much later via a whistle-blower) seems to have become more obvious and more depressing.

And sadly this is also true of the Church of England. Botched reviews of historic abuse evoke the same stock response: *the needs of the victims are always of paramount importance*. And then another review panel is found to have conflicting interests; someone else is sacked; there are more apologies from senior clerics; another 'independent body' is convened and those words begin to sound completely meaningless.

Anxious organisations often resort to data to shore up their sense of self. I think about this every time I read the stats and figures of Dioceses re-ordering their deaneries and parishes to put a brave face on the fact they've literally run out of money. But all the data in the world (and all the safeguarding record keeping, much as it's important) cannot replace the kind of spiritual insight that we all need if we're to have any consonance between outward and inward reality - and if we're to be 'as wise as serpents'.

All the safeguarding disasters that have happened in the Church can be summed up as things that were done in the dark finally being brought into the light; things done by someone influential who looked like the real thing but who, inwardly, was covering up; obfuscating; denying. Someone in whom there was a gross mismatch, inwardly and outwardly.

As humans we should be deeply suspicious of people that are not accountable; of people who say one thing and do another. Jesus called them hypocrites. Here is a golden opportunity for us to model being attentive to our inner person, because none of us is immune. It was said of Jesus that he 'taught with authority' and this surely had a lot to do with his inner and outer person being at one. What are the core motivations for the things you do?

Hypocritical religion is contrasted sharply here with the belief of the Syrophenician woman whose story we hear in the second part of the reading. With her it's 'no holds barred' as she loudly and persistently petitions Jesus to heal her daughter. The disciples' mindset has not yet expanded enough to recognise the woman as worthy of Jesus' attention. Even Jesus needs a bit of persuading, it seems - or maybe he's just waiting for her faith to expand to its full potential - maybe he's enjoying the banter.

This woman, crazy with worry about her daughter, is a model of faith. She doesn't hide her need; it's right out there in the open. She's not worried about what people think; she's persistent; she throws herself utterly upon Jesus and she has a

killer punchline: “Yes, Lord; yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their master’s table” , after which Jesus concedes defeat (as it were).

Jesus is utterly willing to enter into our deepest need too. Our inner life is precious to him. Who we are on the inside and who we are on the outside are equally known to him. That means he knows our hopes and fears; he knows about the things we’d rather other people didn’t know; and he’s willing to work with us as we gently open ourselves in prayer and to trusted others, in pursuit of goodness.

Thanks be to God.