



6 November 2016  
The Twenty-Fourth Sunday after Trinity  
Choral Evensong  
Deuteronomy 1 vv. 1, 9–18  
Galatians 5 vv. 13–15, 22–26

## Power and Community life

By The Rev'd Duncan Dormor  
The Dean, St John's College

*“Atticus – said Jem bleakly.  
He turned in the doorway. ‘What, son?’  
‘How could they do it, how could they?’  
‘I don’t know, but they did it. They’ve done it before and they did it tonight,  
and they’ll do it again and when they do it again – seems that only children weep.”*

Our desire for the good life, for the accomplished life requires us to be recognized for who we are and held in esteem and warm regard by others. In whatever shape or form it may take, enjoying and benefitting from the friendship and sense of solidarity that being part of a human community brings is part of what it means to live a fulfilled human life.

But such solidarity comes at a price for communities are also places of power, power-over, and a bargain has to be struck between the individual and the community, between the pursuit of individual desires and common goals. Whether acknowledged or not, questions of power are endemic - where does it lie within the community? In whose hands? How do they exercise it? Is it *for* or *against* others? *Which* others? And a good deal of power seems to lie with the community itself; for communities have a curious ability to shape individuals in ways, seen and unseen. Communities ‘make people’; they produce and reproduce moral persons: if a person were a text, communities seem to have extensive editorial powers: to produce a house style with the reproduction of values and habits and attitudes within people. Of course it meets resistance, yet we can often come to identify familiar shapes. We might say, ‘you have to understand they are from X or Y’ or even ‘they are a typical product of this school or that College’.

The human scale of community makes it a place of face and voice; of tone and gesture; of emotions, bodies and relationships; communities are the place where we are known and called by name. In a world so shaped by impersonal and bureaucratic forces, ‘faceless’ as we often say, such places of belonging and solidarity make communities ‘bodies of embrace’, which can bring a warm comforting envelope of belonging and united purpose. Just being an accepted member of community brings a certain sort of basic OK-ness – it gives us power to be.

But there is another very different story to tell. For communities are also the places of ‘bad blood’, of secrets and lies, of long-held grudges, resentments, envies; and of gossip and personal feuds. This darker side of community is touched on in both of our readings. So we find an exhausted, exasperated Moses wearied by the ‘cumbrance, burden and strife’ of the disputes of his fellow Hebrews, he is unable to bear them; and Paul reaches for more dramatic language in touching on the dangers that lurk within community life warning that care be taken that in the pursuit of freedom people do not ‘take chunks out of each other’, do not ‘chew each other up’. Alongside the various manifestations of ‘bad blood’ within, communities can also feed off their exclusion of others, bolstering their sense of power and esteem by distinguishing themselves from others. And, of course, history also provides all sorts of examples of how under the cloak of maintaining order and a sense of shared identity, righteous emotion has been whipped up generating moral panics and creating scapegoats.

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Some of you may well recognize my opening exchange from *To Kill a Mockingbird* – one of the most powerful novels of moral persuasion of the last century.

With the child's innocent cry of despair: '*How could they do it, how could they?*'

Answered by the world-weary sadness of his father:

*'I don't know, but they did it. They've done it before and they did it tonight, and they'll do it again and when they do it again – seems that only children weep.'*

What they did was to convict an innocent black man, Tom Robinson, of assault. Convicted against the evidence, against the instincts of the judge, the novel describes the power of a community closing rank and seeking to protect 'one of their own' even when the individual in question is widely viewed as a despicable and violent person, and indeed who is very strongly suspected of being the perpetuator of violence. In this account of a flagrant miscarriage of justice motivated by racism, Tom Robinson, is judged guilty of assaulting one of his actual neighbours, who lives a mere 500 yards away.

In reality, Tom is guilty of nothing more than 'loving his neighbour as himself' by extending friendship, in reaching out, in compassion, to a lonely young woman with an abusive father. Needless to say, this compassion is not recognized as such by a jury thinking they are doing right by what they perceive to be 'their community'.

Such an abuse of power stands in sharp contrast to the biblical principle outlined with remarkable clarity in our first reading. For here, we have a startling commitment to impartiality, to natural justice and the moral equality of persons: Judgment between the 'citizen' and the 'resident alien', between the 'small and the great' must be absolutely impartial says the writer of *Deuteronomy*. And this impartiality must be exercised with complete independence, irrespective of human power for God is no respecter of persons, he is not partial – and 'the judgment is God's'.

Love of Neighbour is thus served by the pursuit of two virtues simultaneously: that of friendship and that of justice. Within community life, the love of neighbour is of course pursued primarily through variations on the theme of friendship, of positive regard for others - we recognize, affirm, encourage, mentor, build up, let people know that they are valued and loved, Even, though people may be of a different standing, community life at its best, encourages and seeks to promote a moral equality between all: names are known, smiles exchanged, relationships are marked by gentleness, kindness and generosity - compassion is exercised.

Justice on the other hand demands that we bracket out all personal considerations; that we are blind to all characteristics that might engage our emotions and our sympathies; that we distance ourselves, follow rules and procedures, that on occasion we prefer the interests of the 'anonymous other' to those of a friend. Here our love of neighbour flows through the medium of the institution rather than through personal encounter. Yet the good of the community is served by both. For both seek after moral equality by recognizing the value of each and every human being, of encouraging us to see the other and their interests as being morally equivalent to our own. If the former requires us to develop compassion, the latter can help us develop one of the key cardinal virtues that of courage: For the pursuit of justice, as *To Kill a Mockingbird* so amply demonstrates, sometimes involves standing alone, challenging and confronting the assumed reality of others.

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The simultaneous pursuit of friendship and justice, compassion and courage, within community is fundamental to our development as mature Christian persons: it produces the ‘bright sadness’, the emotional sobriety that characterizes wisdom. It requires of us that we endure what Wesley called the ‘contradiction of sinners’; that we learn to absorb the pain that comes with those moments of anti-epiphany, when it is brought home to us once again that much in this world is tragic and wasteful and disappointing; that the same brutalities and injustices are perpetrated again and again and again eroding and compromising the good that might have occurred. A reality we can only hold up into the light of faith and hope, through prayer and action. In the face of this, we can, ourselves, only exercise power authentically through another quite specifically Christian virtue - of which the lawyer, Atticus Finch - provides one of the compelling depictions in literature – that of humility, a virtue firmly anchored in an understanding that we too are sinners within and alongside others in a community of sinners - but also a virtue that partakes in the divine as surely as love or justice through the person of Jesus Christ who did not grasp at equality with God, but rather humbling himself taking our feeble, human form.

Amen