



A sermon for the Cathedral Eucharist at Wells Cathedral, preached on Sunday 3 May by the Reverend Edward Day, Cathedral Curate.

Please Place Luggage in the Overhead Compartments

Surely there are some sins that can never be forgiven? We might be tempted to think about the seven cardinal sins, mortal sins, and the unfathomable sins of the past. Yet there are some much closer sins that we humans might find hard to forgive. God is indeed very good at forgiving; we humans tend to be a bit slower.

Having recently sold my car after she, rather spectacularly, failed her MOT, I have been relying a little more on public transport. And I'm afraid to report that public transport is awash with seemingly unforgivable, anti-social, and nightmarish sins. On one hand, there is the public transport system itself. You might think of some of those annoying traits. It can be expensive; it can be uncomfortable; it can be late; and, in a lot of this county of Somerset, it can simply not exist at all. These are a bit annoying, however, on the whole, I think they are forgivable inconveniences. Buses can be an affordable way to get about; intercity trains make travel a matter of hours rather than days; and, of course, in this global climate emergency, public transport is making up for some of its irritabilities by being the kinder option for our environment. Forgivable on the whole.

On the other hand, the behaviour of passengers is where truly unforgivable sins seem to dwell. In general, I think I am a relatively forgiving and charitable person, and you might think you are too. However, the moment that someone sitting next to you in the train carriage reaches into their bag and pulls out a Tupperware box full of boiled eggs, I'm afraid the entire concept of forgiveness goes out of the window.

Passengers on public transport have an unending arsenal of ways to deliberately, or even inadvertently, frustrate their fellow travellers. Sloppily munching on their food so loudly that you can't hear yourself think. Playing their music, somehow always terrible, out loud. Passengers who are seemingly trying to prove that they have never heard of antiperspirant, bathtubs, or even soap. People talking in the utopian dream that is the quiet carriage. Manspreaders. Unsolicited mansplainers. And at times passengers who are being outright rude or abusive.

I think AC/DC might be wrong. It is not a highway to hell; it is an overcrowded rail replacement bus.

But above all of these poor behaviours, this morning's readings bring to my mind what I think is the worst public transport sin. Namely, when you are on an overcrowded bus or train with standing room only, and spot several seats occupied not by people but by feet or with small bags. It makes the blood boil.

The reason I want to single this out is because I think that in the example of St Stephen, the Protomartyr, we see the corresponding virtue that seat hogging lacks. In unnecessarily taking up space, one denies the place of others. We, as Christians, however, are called to something different. Following Christ's example, we are people who should make room. Out of the abundance of our faith, love, and charity, we should be accommodating. That is accommodating through all of its meanings: making room for others, adapting ourselves, being willing to reconcile, obliging others, and providing for the needs of others.

Accommodating and making room for others is a virtue that we hear expressed in the very words of Christ in our reading this morning from the Gospel according to St John. Christ's message is not about exclusivity and exclusion; it is about abundant love and provision. As our Lord Jesus Christ said, *'Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God; believe also in me. In my Father's house there are many dwelling places. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you?'*

Here, Jesus talks about preparing a place for those who believe in Him and follow Him. He lovingly reassures us that in His Father's house, there are many dwelling places. Christ sets us an example of how powerful, transformative, and compassionate it can be to make room for others. To accommodate.

This is a quality that we also see in the life of St Stephen. Stephen is remembered for being one of the first cohort of deacons appointed in Acts 6.1-6 (alongside Philip, Prochorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicolas of Antioch). As he was the first and eldest, in the Orthodox tradition, he is not simply Stephen the Deacon but Stephen the Archdeacon. There are many other titles that have been given to St Stephen, for example, Apostle to the Seventy and the Protomartyr of the Faith.

As one of the early deacons, St Stephen was called to undertake a very specific vocation. The deacons were tasked with managing the daily distribution of food to widows. It was an act of servanthood and charity. This ministry was part of the disciples' aim to accommodate for the needs of others. In supporting the nutritional needs of the widows, Stephen and his fellow disciples were making room for them in the Early Church.

There have been a lot of ecclesiological developments since then, but I think the accommodating ministry of deacons can still be seen today. St Stephen didn't have the words of the Church of England's Ordinal to guide him, but today when ordained the bishop reads a statement to the deacons summarising their responsibilities. In short, modern deacons are called to be heralds of Christ's kingdom, proclaiming the Good News in word and deeds and acting as agents of God's love. Deacons are called to serve the community in which they are set and, importantly, are to bring the needs and hopes of the community to the Church. And, in one of the most beautiful lines of the ordination service, deacons are tasked with 'searching out the poor and weak, the sick and lonely[,] and those who are oppressed and powerless, reaching into the forgotten corners of the world, that the love of God may be made visible'.

This is a ministry of accommodation. Making room in people's hearts for the Good News of Jesus Christ. Making room in the Church for the hopes and fears of the community. Making room in the world for the love of God to be made visible.

In his dying moment, St Stephen faithfully maintained the accommodating and diaconal love to which he was called to express. As we have heard in our first reading from the Acts of the Apostles, after facing the Sanhedrin, St Stephen was condemned. The crowds *'covered their ears, and with a loud voice all rushed together against him. Then they dragged him out of the city and began to stone him [to death], and the witnesses laid their coats at the feet of a young man named Saul'*. In the face of his own demise, Stephen accepted his fate and he prayed. And then, in his final mortal act, St Stephen made room for forgiveness. He didn't know that that man Saul would one day become the great St Paul. Regardless, with his final breaths, he made room.

Following the example of St Stephen, I pray that we may all be inspired in our lives to exercise this accommodating love. To make room for God in our hearts. To make room for the needy in our homes. To make room for everyone in our Churches. And to make room for God's love in our world.

Therefore, remove the baggage next to you and make room for your fellow travellers.

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