

LOYALTY CARD

Sung Eucharist

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Trinity I

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How many of you, I wonder, find yourself in the queue at the Sainsbury's, Morrisons, Tesco or Waitrose check-out thinking, 'Why did I choose this one?' The chap in front has lost his wallet – the lady on the till talks endlessly to each customer. Once I was told of a nun arriving at the till with too little cash She started unloading her basket again even after the bill had been printed off. Perhaps instead, you brace yourself, take a deep breath and go to the automatic till.

Which ever way you go, you're almost certain to be greeted at some point with: 'Have you swiped your Nectar Card? Do you have your Tesco Club Card? Do you have a My Waitrose Card?' All of these things, including my Shell fuel card which earns me *Air Miles* are euphemistically called *Loyalty Cards*. I say euphemistically since loyalty seems to me to be a rather more sophisticated concept than all these ruses imply. For loyalty here means – 'We'll tempt you back here soon because you know there's something in it for you.'

Now in itself there's nothing wrong with all this. It probably makes good business sense. But, in human terms, loyalty has a very different and deeper meaning. Each of us at times will have been grateful for the loyalty of others. Perhaps our reputation has been blackened and a friend comes to our support. Perhaps we need more help in completing a task, and a good friend comes to our aid. Almost certainly, for many people it is within families that loyalty is most often expressed. Whoever else lets you down it won't be your father or mother, husband or wife, son or daughter. That's why marital infidelity is such a corrosive and destructive issue.

Each of today's readings hints in rather different ways at this same theme. That story of Elijah and the prophets of Baal is a longish tale but it's worth listening to the whole story. It belies all who would say the Bible is devoid of humour. Listen to Elijah's goading the prophets of Baal. 'Cry louder', he says, 'Surely he is a god; either he's meditating, or he's wandered away, or he's on a journey, or perhaps he's asleep and you need to wake him up.' It's great humour, but beneath it there is too a seriousness. Israel's God has saved them and made them a nation. But this crowd – perhaps in collusion with King Ahab – have gone after another god. They expected their loyalty card to deliver and it didn't. Elijah is both ironic and challenging.

Or, we read of Paul's anger and disappointment with the Christians of Galatia: 'I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting the one who called you in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel.' He continues: '...not that there *is another gospel*, but there are some ... who want to pervert the gospel of Christ. Some form of idolatry has caused the Galatians to go for what they assume to be a better loyalty card.'

But the gospel comes at it from the other direction. Here we encounter a Roman centurion, surely an unlikely supporter of Jesus? But Jesus touches the centurion's heart; he can see Jesus' authenticity; he can see that Jesus is the apostle of God; he can see that he can trust Jesus. With great humility, he says: 'Lord, do not trouble yourself, for I am not worthy to have you come under my roof.' These words of course we say weekly, even daily as we celebrate the eucharist. The centurion's humility and his loyalty to his own conscience is repaid – the servant is healed. He was right to trust Jesus.

This takes us to the very heart of our Christian faith. For having confessed our faith in baptism and confirmation, we are called to the most profound of loyalties. We are called to stay our hearts and minds on Jesus Christ, to open ourselves to God. By doing so we point ourselves outwards, away from ourselves. At the heart of the concept of sin is the human tendency to be selfish, to be self-centred or focused permanently on *me*. Modern attitudes confirm all this. Self-fulfilment, finding oneself, self-interest – all point inward. Indeed, even self-denial bends back almost like a boomerang to *me*.

Just before Jesus' arrest and trial we find him with his disciples in the Garden of Gethsemane. He breaks down and prays to God. 'Take this cup (that is the cup of suffering) from me, yet not my will but thine be done.' The disciples all forsake him and flee – his path to the cross is now inevitable.

Gethsemane is a most powerful picture never to be lost from our minds and hearts. It reminds us that everyone of us, from our baptism onwards, possesses the most powerful but also the most costly loyalty card of all. That loyalty card is the *cross*. But instead of *Air Miles* or *Nectar Points*, it will mean undoubtedly challenges and suffering. But God in Jesus Christ is eternally loyal, eternally trustworthy. In the Resurrection that loyalty pours out again. Can we face that challenge? Amen.

Readings

IKings. 18. 20-39.

Galatians. 1. 1-12.

Luke. 7. 1-10.

IKings. 18. 20-39.

20 So Ahab sent to all the people of Israel, and gathered the prophets together at Mount Carmel.

21 And Eli'jah came near to all the people, and said, "How long will you go limping with two different opinions? If the Lord is God, follow him; but if Ba'al, then follow him." And the people did not answer him a word.

22 Then Eli'jah said to the people, "I, even I only, am left a prophet of the Lord; but Ba'al's prophets are four hundred and fifty men.

23 Let two bulls be given to us; and let them choose one bull for themselves, and cut it in pieces and lay it on the wood, but put no fire to it; and I will prepare the other bull and lay it on the wood, and put no fire to it.

24 And you call on the name of your god and I will call on the name of the Lord; and the God who answers by fire, he is God." And all the people answered, "It is well spoken."

25 Then Eli'jah said to the prophets of Ba'al, "Choose for yourselves one bull and prepare it first, for you are many; and call on the name of your god, but put no fire to it."

26 And they took the bull which was given them, and they prepared it, and called on the name of Ba'al from morning until noon, saying, "O Ba'al, answer us!" But there was no voice, and no

one answered. And they limped about the altar which they had made.

27 And at noon Eli'jah mocked them, saying, "Cry aloud, for he is a god; either he is musing, or he has gone aside, or he is on a journey, or perhaps he is asleep and must be awakened."

28 And they cried aloud, and cut themselves after their custom with swords and lances, until the blood gushed out upon them.

29 And as midday passed, they raved on until the time of the offering of the oblation, but there was no voice; no one answered, no one heeded.

30 Then Eli'jah said to all the people, "Come near to me"; and all the people came near to him. And he repaired the altar of the Lord that had been thrown down;

31 Eli'jah took twelve stones, according to the number of the tribes of the sons of Jacob, to whom the word of the Lord came, saying, "Israel shall be your name";

32 and with the stones he built an altar in the name of the Lord. And he made a trench about the altar, as great as would contain two measures of seed.

33 And he put the wood in order, and cut the bull in pieces and laid it on the wood. And he said, "Fill four jars with water, and pour it on the burnt offering, and on the wood."

34 And he said, “Do it a second time”; and they did it a second time. And he said, “Do it a third time”; and they did it a third time.

35 And the water ran round about the altar, and filled the trench also with water.

36 And at the time of the offering of the oblation, Eli'jah the prophet came near and said, “O Lord, God of Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, let it be known this day that thou art God in Israel, and that I am thy servant, and that I have done all these things at thy word.

37 Answer me, O Lord, answer me, that this people may know that thou, O Lord, art God, and that thou hast turned their hearts back.”

38 Then the fire of the Lord fell, and consumed the burnt offering, and the wood, and the stones, and the dust, and licked up the water that was in the trench.

39 And when all the people saw it, they fell on their faces; and they said, “The Lord, he is God; the Lord, he is God.”

Galatians. 1. 1-12.

¹ Paul an apostle—not from men nor through man, but through Jesus Christ and God the Father, who raised him from the dead—² and all the brethren who are with me,

³ Grace to you and peace from God the Father and our Lord Jesus Christ,

⁴ who gave himself for our sins to deliver us from the present evil age, according to the will of our God and Father;

⁵ to whom be the glory for ever and ever.

⁶ I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting him who called you in the grace of Christ and turning to a different gospel.

⁷ not that there is another gospel, but there are some who trouble you and want to pervert the gospel of Christ.

⁸ But even if we, or an angel from heaven, should preach to you a gospel contrary to that which we preached to you, let him be accursed.

⁹ As we have said before, so now I say again, If any one is preaching to you a gospel contrary to that which you received, let him be accursed.

¹⁰ Am I now seeking the favor of men, or of God? Or am I trying to please men? If I were still pleasing men, I should not be a servant^[a] of Christ.

¹¹ For I would have you know, brethren, that the gospel which was preached by me is not man's^[b] gospel.

¹² For I did not receive it from man, nor was I taught it, but it came through a revelation of Jesus Christ.

Luke. 7. 1-10.

1 Now when he had ended all his sayings in the audience of the people, he entered into Capernaum.

2 And a certain centurion's servant, who was dear unto him, was sick, and ready to die.

3 And when he heard of Jesus, he sent unto him the elders of the Jews, beseeching him that he would come and heal his servant.

4 And when they came to Jesus, they besought him instantly, saying, That he was worthy for whom he should do this:

5 For he loveth our nation, and he hath built us a synagogue.

6 Then Jesus went with them. And when he was now not far from the house, the centurion sent friends to him, saying unto him, Lord, trouble not thyself: for I am not worthy that thou shouldest enter under my roof:

7 Wherefore neither thought I myself worthy to come unto thee: but say in a word, and my servant shall be healed.

8 For I also am a man set under authority, having under me soldiers, and I say unto one, Go, and he goeth; and to another, Come, and he cometh; and to my servant, Do this, and he doeth *it*.

9 When Jesus heard these things, he marvelled at him, and turned him about, and said unto the people that followed him, I say unto you, I have not found so great faith, no, not in Israel.

10 And they that were sent, returning to the house, found the servant whole that had been sick.