

SERMON FOR 22nd Sunday in Ordinary Time

2.9.18

BIRKENHEAD

Rev Jordan Greatbatch

A colleague once told me of going in to his office at Church one morning to find a quickly scribbled note on his desk. The author of the note wrote something like this, “It seems that our youth don’t know how to spell any better than they know the bible.” This colleague walked out in the doorway where he had a good view of the newly created bulletin board that welcomed kids and adults to the Sunday school wing of the church. In bright, happy colours, it invited one and all to attend “Sunday Skool”, with school spelt with a K.

He Chuckled to himself as he realised their intent was to get people’s attention.... and it had worked. He shared with me the fact that he was mildly amused, but was also angry. He knew the young people who had created the bulletin board had sacrificed part of their Saturday so that the congregation would feel welcome to a new season of Sunday school.

The person who had left the note on his desk was missing something. They were missing the deeper message. In today’s passage from Mark, I think Jesus is feeling something similar. We normally associate Jesus as a soft, loving and compassionate man, which I have no doubt he was. However, we also forget he got angry when he saw those whom he loved been ridiculed or oppressed. Take for example his turning of the moneylenders tables in the temple, not to mention the whipping of the animals.

Today’s passage is the same. We have Jesus gathered with his disciples to share a meal, which is one of the many ways Jesus did his ministry. However, this time some of the Pharisees saw that he and his disciples have not washed their hands. The Pharisees look to Jesus as the leader and ask, “Why do your disciples not live according to the tradition of the elders, but eat with defiled hands? (v.5) I cannot help but wonder at this moment if Jesus does not feel a little angry on behalf of his disciples.

They have sacrificed so much to follow him; some of them have left their families, careers and statuses, much more than a Saturday afternoon. Jesus’ response therefore cuts deep, and highlights what is important to God. He quotes Isaiah “This people honour me with their lips, but their

hearts are far from me; in vain do they worship me, teaching human precepts as doctrines.” (vv.6-7).

Jesus can come across as harsh, perhaps even criticising the Jewish law itself, for which he was a part. However, I think it is more complex than simply saying Jesus is all about freedom and no laws. He is not that irresponsible. For we know as human beings we need a sense of order to feel secure.

Take the road laws for example; they are in place in order that society may operate smoothly and in order that people will not get hurt. Moreover, how many times have we found ourselves getting irate at those who seem to disregard the road laws as if they do not apply to them? But we also realise, that sometimes these laws don't fix the problem, and in fact there are even times when they have to be broken, say letting someone in front of you out of courtesy at a give way or stop sign to avoid a hold up.

For the Pharisees, the Mosaic Law was so important because they saw it as a means to keep in relationship with God. I suspect they were zealous out of a genuine desire to keep Israel Holy in order to stay as covenant people. There has been a lot of new scholarship done in the area of second

temple Judaism in the past thirty years, which has highlighted the fact that for centuries the Christian church has caricatured the Jews as Pharisees who love law over grace, the letter over the spirit.

Though this may have been true for some of the Pharisees themselves, they were merely a sect within Judaism and only made up a small amount of the Jewish religious landscape at the time. In fact, religious life in Israel in the first century looked more like our modern church with its variety of denominations, beliefs and rituals. The Pharisees like some modern Christian denominations saw themselves as the pure and right form of religious expression.

Therefore, Jesus was not throwing all Jewish laws and precepts in to one bag. He was instead cutting through the surface of the law and exploring the true meaning of good religion. Good religion may have laws, rules and rituals, which the community live out, but they must never get in the way of offering real human beings love and compassion, and for keeping those out of the Kingdom who we deem unfit.

The great sin says Jesus, is hypocrisy, which is what he was angry about. Hypocrisy in the end is a lack of self-

integration. Paul Tillich, who was an incredibly intelligent yet sometimes hard-to-grasp theologian, wrote that self-integration is one of the three basic functions of life (the others being self-creativity and self-transformation).

What he meant by this was that in order for life to be realised and our true potential grasped, we must somehow integrate our external lives, our relationships and actions with our inner self, the desires of our hearts. For me, this is all about relationship.

The Pharisee's were not in relationship with God and others because they were following laws rigidly with no room for disagreement. Entering in relationship makes one vulnerable and in fact opens oneself to being changed by the person with whom you are in relationship with. Jesus critiqued from the inside of the community, we as Christians no longer have that inherent privilege, society has shifted, it doesn't mean we shift with it, but rather it forces us to actually engage with the wider society by building relationships.

It raises serious questions for us as a church. How do we respond to the new moral challenges facing society? Changes of law are happening all across the world, Medical

ethics is incredibly complicated, not to mention the nature of marriage and the natural environment. Do we just sit in our ivory towers criticising those whom don't know, or do we engage with those who are of another opinion and find out what they believe and why.

We unfortunately are seeing a disconnect in our society around having honest and open conversations. The recent banning of speakers here in New Zealand, including Don Brash is a concern to me. Freedom of speech is tied in with freedom of religious expression. If we are unable to build relationships and have discussions with those whom we disagree with then we are poorer. If we attempt to shut people down whom we find offensive then we are no better than Pharisees. Jesus never shied away from difficult conversations and difficult encounters. Rather as in today's Gospel, he challenged the opinions of those he disagreed with but still tried to maintain a relationship as difficult as that was.

I know from my own life that many of my friends have had no Christian upbringing whatsoever. They hold a different worldview in regards to faith. Now in order to learn why they believe there is no God and why I do, we have to have a relationship, not one governed by laws or rules, but by

honest conversation. It is the same with God. Jesus' critique of his culture was that certain members had lost that, and needed to get back to the foundation of their faith, a relationship with their creator. We can do this ourselves by firstly being open to those who hold different opinions than our own. Sometimes that means connecting with people we wouldn't usually associate with, listening and offering our perspective. Today's Gospel also challenges to put aside those things that hinder others coming to know God. Sometimes, like the Pharisees, our traditions and the things we hold dear can get in the way of our own and others relationship with God. We know rules are important and essential to a good society, but we also know that rules don't always change behaviour, rather it is relationship and conversation that help to influence those we meet along the road.

So may we, like Jesus, have the courage to speak, the patience to listen and the will to act.