

**SERMON FOR ORDINARY SUNDAY 25C  
ALL SAINTS BIRKENHEAD  
THE REVEREND JORDAN GREATBATCH**

Have you heard of a man called Studdert-Kennedy? ...I thought you might have! Yes, he was famous wartime priest and poet. He was also a chaplain to the forces in the First World War. There's a story of him going through the trenches in a line of soldiers. As they waded through the mud Studdert-Kennedy slipped and fell on the man in front. There was much grumbling and someone in front called back "Who's that". Studdert-Kennedy replied "It's the Church". From the front again. "What the bloody-hell's the Church doing here?" A good question indeed.

"What's the Church doing here?" Of course for Studdert-Kennedy it was imperative that the Church was where the people in need were. That's why he went to the front. It's a question which is still relevant. Unfortunately the Church doesn't seem to be where it is needed most.

As we encountered at our recent Synod, the Church is in crisis. The Dunedin diocese may cease to exist.

Rural churches are closing down, and the church is increasingly marginalised in public life. Has the Church lost its voice? Does anyone care? Well fortunately or unfortunately I may say, I do care.

The Church has long held a prophet voice throughout its existence though its voice has often been the voice of those on the margins. We think of the Old Testaments prophets such as Amos that we have encountered this morning. These prophets had the courage to speak to those in power and influence by the very fact that they were both in society but also outside it. These prophets often came from the lower parts of society and saw the oppression first hand.

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Today's Gospel is a difficult one to follow. The parable that Jesus uses is a curious one. I have to admit that there are lots of inconsistencies in it and the message does not seem very clear. Why should Jesus commend a dishonest manager?

It is important to keep in mind that the manager was not commended for his dishonesty. Jesus commends him for his astuteness. This manager saw his job coming to an end so he made friends with some of his master's debtors by letting them off part of the debt. When the manager was out of a job, he thought these people would help him out, because he had helped them out. This is was an important part of ancient culture. What we might call bribing, or buying influence was an accepted part of relationship building. You do me a favor, and I owe you favor. This can be a difficult concept for us to come to terms with.

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I think that what Jesus was getting his hearers to engage with was the fact that the master commended the manager for staying friends with those who were his debtors. The manager did not put himself off side with others, but kept in relationship with them. Being friends with another

suggests some sense of equality, some mutual understanding. Jesus told his disciples they are to be just as astute in dealing with the highest goal, the proclamation of the gospel.

Increasingly in NZ there are people of other nationalities who have come here to find a new life. Driving through any suburb in Auckland and you now witness a cultural diversity that is ever increasing.

This is where our faith impinges on life. How we connect with the diversity of people in Auckland will demonstrate how we actually live the gospel. Within the present circumstances of the world there are those being subjected to discrimination for no reason. We look at the rise of Donald Trump and a politics that seeks to blame 'the other' for the present problems in society and the world. This is not new however, we know the horrors of racial and cultural scapegoating all too well in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. As a Christian community we have a responsibility to remain in communication with those who are on the outer, those who are different, those seeking some sense of community or place to belong. Discrimination is not part of our faith.

So Jesus invites us to consider where our friendships lie. How can we stay in relationship with one another? These questions may apply to us as individuals or they may apply globally. Staying in relationship can still allow for justice, but may not allow for indiscriminate retaliation. So in our dealings with each other, and as nations deal with each other, the question remains the same. How can we, like the Holy Trinity whom we worship, remain in a relationship of mutuality and respect? Not easy to achieve, but a constant ideal to which we work. As we work for that ideal of relationship, so we become more like God, until we reach perfection in our unity with the Trinity.

As history continues to unfold and we look at facing a difficult future not only for the human race but also for our planet it is more important than ever to keep coming back to the Gospel imperative of humble

relationships guided by love and understanding.

The questions we need to keep asking, both for our selves and for the world, are questions like these:

How does what we are saying about God match the God about whom Jesus spoke? Do our actions reflect something of the actions of Jesus who proclaims God in his actions?

Does what we do and say help to build the realm of God on earth, which after all was the primary mission of Jesus whom we say we follow?

I know there will be endless argument and discussion about what happens, both globally and personally. But if the Church is to survive we must be continually questioning our images of God and our relationships with the wider world. Only through this engagement will we be able to proclaim our faith and maintain the hope we share, that love is stronger than hate, life stronger than death.