

Sermon Ordinary Sunday 17 Year C 2019

For those of you who have had the privilege of being parents, you would know that a large part of your job was to help your children grow into being adults. Most people undertake parenthood in love: a free giving of oneself to their spouse and to their child. It is perhaps the most important vocation anyone can ever undertake: to nurture, protect, support, to grow and to finally let go of the next generation. Whether it is helping a child take their first step, encouraging them with tears and trepidation to go up the driveway on the first day of school, teaching them to use the washing machine or taking them for driving lessons, parents, mostly, recognise that they must impart knowledge, wisdom and skill to the young so they have the tools and ability to make their own way in the world.

Something similar occurs in the relationship between the master craftsman or tradesman and their apprentice. The senior figure is not hoping to keep the young lad or lass immature and ignorant. Their job is also to impart knowledge, wisdom and skill; to form and shape the young worker in good practice and responsibility; to *share* their experience and not keep it to themselves.

And something of the parent/child, tradesman/apprentice relationship is evident in the gospel today. We might imagine the Lord Jesus smiling quietly to himself, in joyous relief, at the unnamed disciples' request, '*Lord, teach us to pray.*' It must have been a sign to Jesus that at last, *at last*, something his message, his ministry, his presence was starting to shake the disciple; was starting to stir within them; was starting to have them want something more, something deeper, something truer... For Jesus - gently leading his followers to maturity - this was a sign that *they* were at last starting to grow up.

The Gospel portion placed before us today immediately follows what we heard last week in the little story from the house of Mary and Martha, where Mary - sitting at the feet of Jesus - is assured she has chosen the better part. At Jesus' feet Mary has taken the position of disciple, the position of listening. She has shown how she wants to hear and receive Christ's living word.

And so, having this ideal held up to them, the disciples today are wanting a part of the action: if this woman Mary can choose the better part, then perhaps they too can be part of it. *Lord, teach us to pray.*

It would seem that much of the initial attraction that Christ had for those first followers lay in his fresh and unconventional relationship with the Father. Christ approached the Father with confidence. Confidence in this relationship surely rested and grew out of his life of prayer. We hear in numerous places throughout the gospels of Christ withdrawing in prayer. Prayer was the basis, the powerhouse, of his relationship with God. The great beauty of the text placed before us today is that Christ is inviting us to share in *the same* intimacy and to enjoy *the same* confidence that he has in his relationship with the Father. The attitude of confidence is something we continually need to grow in. We need to be continually reminded that *this is* a possibility for us, that *this is* parts of God's dream for us: that *we can* approach God with boldness and confidence.

For Jesus - and for us - this confidence comes from knowing who we are before God, and knowing who and what God is for us. The great tragedy is that for so many Christians, the God they claim to believe in *is not* in fact the Christian God. For so many Christians (for too many!) the God they claim to worship and believe in bears little or no resemblance to the God revealed to us in Christ Jesus. God might be understood as some sort of vague force or power. Or God remains remote, strange, to be approached only with trepidation or on special occasions. Of course, when drawing near to the Holy Things there does need be a reverent awe. A casual familiarity with God is not really helpful. Parents that model their parenting on friendship are not really doing their children any service. A friend is a friend. A parent is a parent. The apprentice must shut up and listen, to patiently learn and observe before he can branch out on his own. There must be respect and boundaries in both these forms of relationship. I am always more than a little uneasy when people approach their worship in a casual manner, all chatty and easy going. Some churches have introduced lounge chairs and coffee machines and carpet throughout into their worship spaces.

Rather than falling to their knees, some worshippers wander into their churches sipping their lattes; making the faith just a tad too tame, a tad too domestic, a tad too safe and familiar for approaching the Living God.... Yes, we must *wrestle* with the tension of approaching God with both reverent awe as well with confidence. But we are more likely to strike the right balance when we approach God with awe while at the same time holding onto what is communicated to us in the Gospel today. In the three little portions laid out for us today, we hear the Gospel writer Luke telling us the same thing: *God is for us*. And it is our knowledge and faith and trust that God is truly, actually *for us* where we will find our confidence for approaching God.

We are so familiar with the Lord's Prayer that it is a shame we lose the force of words in the Greek. The imperatives - *come, give, forgive, do not* - that we hear in the Lord's Prayer reveal the kind of confidence *we* can have when approaching the Father. It is the same God who, when we knock, will open the door. When we search for him, we will find him. So often people imagine God waiting up in a cloud with a big stick to bash us over the head when we step out of line. So, we need to take to hearts Jesus' words: *'what father among you would hand his son a stone when he asked for bread or snake instead of a fish?'* God is for us!! And it from this that we can grow in confidence and boldness in approaching the God of Jesus Christ – God is *with* us, and God is *for* us. Our job - all we need to do – is to simply accept this.

If there is a crisis in the church today it is a crisis of confidence. In too many places the church is not sure of its message, not sure what we're really on about, not quite sure of our relationship with the modern world, not quite sure if the good news of God in Jesus Christ is in fact good news at all. We are struggling to find our identity, to work out what - if anything - we might say to the modern world. But if the gospel reminds us of anything today, it is that we can have confidence in God, our loving, forgiving father, who only wishes the best for us. Growing in faith means growing in confidence. Not in *our* abilities or skills or capabilities. But confidence in the life and relationship God calls us to and invites us to share in. When we have confidence in that, then we will have something worth sharing. Amen.