

Sermon Ordinary Sunday 26 Year B 2021

We live in a world which increasingly values specialisation. But the well-rounded person – someone accomplished in a wide range of skills - has been the traditional goal of western education. We still speak of the Renaissance Man. In the period of history we call the Renaissance, that *certainly* was the goal of education. We think of a figure like Leonardo da Vinci: painter, sculptor, architect, engineer, anatomist, botanist, inventor. The man who designed the first helicopter also painted the Mona Lisa.

We might also think of someone like King Henry VIII. He spoke several languages, was athletic, loved horse riding and hunting, wrote music and was even a competent theologian. In his younger days (long before Anne Boleyn) he wrote a scathing and well publicised attack on Martin Luther earning him the title ‘Defender of the Faith’ from the Pope himself, a title still held by the monarch. A well-rounded figure intellectually, (even if later in life he become a well rounded figure physically...) The well-rounded figure speaks to a range of experiences, knowledge and skills. If we are not threatened by such competence, then we will most likely be attracted by it.

I think this is one of the reasons our Bible remains at the heart of our life and faith. It speaks to the wide range of human life and experience. It gives us hope and inspiration; it guides us and admonishes us; it reflects the best that humankind is capable of and the worst; it is honest, yet idealistic; it’s the story of God and the story of humankind; it shows us our beginnings and our ultimate destiny. The reason why we continue to read the Bible and take it seriously is not just because we believe it is God’s particular gift to his people, or ‘inspired’ by God, but because it *continues to say* something to us. We do not just read the Bible for historical interest, as if it were just some ancient artefact. We read it because it continues to be relevant. It continues to speak even to our lives, our situations, our issues.

Something of this dynamic as at work even in the gospel we encounter today. Even though it is really only quite a short portion, it reflects something of what I have just spoken about: of the scriptures *speaking to a range and*

depth of experiences and issues. The different parts of the gospel we hear today at first glance appear rather disjointed and unconnected. But they *do* relate to each other and highlight the powerful way the bible gives us *a well-rounded way* of approaching our faith. As so often, the gospel today - almost in one breath - points us in two directions. And by looking in two directions (at the same time, really) some of the usual ways we look at the world and relate to each other are once more challenged.

The first direction Jesus point us to in the Gospel today is *outward*, in this instance outward to those *not* of the community of faith, or at least those who do not easily identify with the community of disciples. But in looking outward we are challenged to recognise signs of goodness and love, the signs of God at work. Sometimes this can be in quite surprising places. The other direction Our Lord points us to is *inward*, in this instance, inward *to* the community of believers. But whereas looking *outward* we saw signs of goodness and of God at work, in being directed *inward* we see the opposite. The unnerving truth is that *within* the community of disciples may be found the obstacle to faith the cause of scandal. Jesus in typical fashion turning upside down how we might normally see the world and see and experience the life of faith.

This inversion of the way we normally perceive things might help moderate some of the conversations going on in this country – and in the church – at present. The gospel today more than suggests that who is in and who is out, who is right and who is wrong, and where truth and wisdom might be found is not as straightforward as sometimes appears. In this, Our Lord really holds up to his disciples - and so to us - a lesson in forbearance and humility.

Forbearance, in that we must be willing to acknowledge that God works in many and diverse ways; that God's work is not limited in the ways we so often seek to limit it; that we must accept that different expressions of faith may reveal to us the same essential truth. And humility, in that sometimes we don't have all the answers; that our practice of the faith may in fact be poor and mean; and that any good we do manage to do is often despite ourselves rather than because of ourselves. Ultimately, the true test of faith is the kind

of people it produces. That is what we have been hearing from the epistle to James the last few weeks: it matters how faith is *shown*. And it can be shown in as simple a thing as giving a glass of water, or something more significant as using the name of Jesus to liberate those captive to dark forces.

The challenge to humility is continued when we turn to the inward direction Jesus points us toward. We read the second half of the Gospel text today and we are glad we don't read the Bible literally, even if we do take it seriously: otherwise, there would be a lot of blind and armless and legless Christians about the place! We approach the life of faith with humility because we recognize the great weight and responsibility that is charged with those who say they follow Jesus. We are called Christian because we are representatives of Christ! We need to take that seriously! We all know the obstacles that so many in the church leaders have caused to people of faith. We know how they have caused many to stumble. It should all give us pause for thought.

In our current context, where deep divisions have been on display this past week, the lessons of forbearance and humility should be especially close to us. In the life of the church, we are not called to agree upon everything. Forbearance and humility will get us a long way in dealing with our disagreements. But our Lord's warning remains, that *we* not be the cause of stumbling to others, that we not be an obstacle to the faith of others. If we think there are simple answers and straightforward solutions - especially over the issues we now face - then we have probably missed something.

We read the Bible in part because they help us address the challenges and difficulties of life. It addresses the breadth and depth of human life. If we take it to heart it *will* help us be better, more-rounded people. It speaks not just to one part of our lives but to all of it. But we do not believe, however, just to be balanced, well-rounded individuals. That would be to reduce faith to some trick, or worse, self-help therapy. Part of our faith is that it is meant to speak to and shape the whole of our lives. If we permit our faith to be that, well then, it might just help us appreciate a little better the complex realities at work in others as well. Even these can be a source of grace. Amen.