

Sermon Lent 3 Year C 2019

It's a crazy kind of world we live in! Recently, women in business have received advice urging them to leave out of their writing and speaking certain words and phrases because they make them appear weak or feeble and unfit for leadership. These words are, 'I'm sorry', 'just', 'I'm no expert' and 'actually.' Someone has even produced a helpful extension to Google Chrome browser called, 'Just not Sorry'. When you write one of the offending phrases into your email, it is underlined in red. Hover your mouse pointer over it, and up pops an explanatory note from one of the self-appointed leaders of the movement. For example, hover over the word 'just' and you get the following guidance: "just' demeans what you have to say. 'Just' shrinks your power."

'Just' was the starting point of all this. A woman called Ellen Leanse wrote a piece for LinkedIn - an online network for professionals - that was then republished on the Business Insider website where it has since been viewed some 4 million times. She described moving to a female dominated company and being aware of how often the word 'just' popped up in emails and conversations: 'I just wanted to check in.' 'I'm just following up...' By listening and reading emails she decided more women were using 'just' more than men and concluded she did not like it. It was a 'permission word' she wrote. It was a subtle message of subordination or deference.... As I started really listening, I realised that striking it from the phrase almost always clarified and strengthened the message.'

The argument is that these words *weaken* what we really want to say. Well, maybe.... Maybe words like 'just' do *soften* a statement. But that may be no bad thing! In this instance perhaps one of the most famous uses of the word was from 1912 and Captain Oakes in the ill-fated Antarctic expedition saying, 'I am *just* going outside and may be sometime.' In that kind of extreme situation, I think we might *want* the statement softened! Well, the campaigner against the use of these words in business wanted women to make a New Years resolution against such self-demeaning words, but there has been a bit of a backlash.

An Oxford linguist and feminist Deborah Cameron argues the campaign is 'naïve and simplistic'. She noted the Nike slogan is 'Just do it' and there is nothing powerless about that! She concluded that 'the suggestion that removing these troublesome words from your emails will significantly advance your career is an insult to your intelligence, and that really does demean you.'

We might well wag and point the finger at the big bad world of business or the insanely politically correct. But the idea that we should abandon certain taboo words or concepts even finds its way into the church. One of the reasons why we were urged to abandon the Book of Common Prayer was that there was supposedly too much emphasis on sin. We were all told that there is too much misery and grovelling before God. There was too much time on our knees asking God to forgive us. Now, Christians, Anglicans included, hardly spend *any time* on their knees anymore and that not just because of the wearing out from age! But because most of us think we don't need to any more. In the revised Rites of Baptism for the Church of England all reference to 'sin' has been removed. Once more from a (well-intentioned though misguided) desire to be more 'relevant'. But remove any notion of sin, we might well say, then what are we saved from? If there is no sin to be saved from, well then, it is a very short step to saying there is no need of Saviour... Quick fixes and easy solutions - as well as a misguided and exaggerated sense of our self worth - are understandable, but really don't help us progress in the life of faith.

An Australian internet initiative, Repent4Lent, a couple years ago invited people to think about what they wanted to repent, with the formula, 'I am sorry for...', to write it down and have someone take a picture of them with their card. But interestingly most of these pictures featured the penitent writing such things as, *I am sorry for how badly our politicians treat the environment, I am sorry how the church treats women and gays, I am sorry our country doesn't welcome refugees, I am sorry so many people suffer domestic violence.* All good sentiments perhaps. But focusing on *everyone else's* issues, not their own simply highlights how, even in the church, we can so easily miss the point. Avoiding or own, personal faults under some mask of pious activity is, I think, particularly unattractive, if not dangerous.

As people of faith we are called to *be real* and sometimes that simply means knowing where we have gone wrong, turning away from sin and saying sorry. Glossing over the fact and avoiding difficult truths - and difficult words - really doesn't cut it... '*Unless you repent*' we hear Jesus say twice in the gospel today. Jesus' warnings to repent include two examples of untimely deaths, one reported to Jesus and then used by him to illustrate the urgency of repentance, the other reported by Jesus as a further illustration of his point. Jewish history recounts instances of Pilate's cruelty so what we hear today reflects something of his brutal rule. Jesus insists that those killed are no more sinful and no more deserving of death than anyone else. They are certainly *not* being punished for their sins and those who make such a link between suffering and sin have got it all wrong.

So why does Jesus twice assert, "If you do not repent you will all perish in the same way" or "as they did"? The answer lay in the constant need for self-reflection and the *missed opportunity* for conversion or reconciliation in the case of sudden and unexpected death. In other words, Jesus is telling his listeners, "Don't be caught unawares; turn your life around in the direction of the gospel while you are able". The Greek verb "to repent" literally means 'to think again'. In the context of Jesus' teaching, it is a call to take seriously - to think again - the challenge of living as part of the Kingdom, the rule, of God.

In highlighting that those who have suffered and been killed are no more deserving of their death than anyone else Jesus is reminding us that we're all in the same boat. We are *all* in need of turning around, *all* in need of God's mercy. Because being real about who we are before God is never to beat us down, never to lead us to a depressive state of misery and self loathing! It is always to raise us up! Repentance and sorrow for sin is always done in the light of God's mercy, his patience, his love! That is the parable of the fig tree. From a farming point of view an unproductive tree *should* be cut down! But in being spared it shows us that there is always another opportunity, always another chance to avail ourselves of God's grace, always another occasion in which we can respond and bear fruit. We don't have to avoid the truth about ourselves. Because if we are real, we are brought to fullness of Life. This Lent, let us repent and be real about it. Amen.