

Sermon Ordinary Sunday 22 Year C 2022

It seems to be human nature that we like to stick with what we know. While familiarity may breed contempt, we are also creatures of habit. Staying close to what is known helps us feel safe and secure. Our little daily habits simply help us to navigate our way through life without too much fuss and bother. But human nature being what it is, it can be hard to value and appreciate how *someone else* might see the world. We think our own worldview, our own experience, is normative and ought to be applied to everyone! What we think is important everyone should hold as important! So sometimes it is good to stand back and assess whether what we hold to be important - the things we like to keep close, the things that are familiar and make us safe and secure - really are that important. Sometimes we need a jolly good shake-up so that we just don't take our view of the world for granted. Sometimes we need a serious and loud wake-up call so we can question and challenge some of those things that are so comforting and familiar. Of course, such self-evaluation and self-critique doesn't come easily or naturally to most of us. But we all must engage – at various stages in our lives - with that difficult process of questioning and evaluating and re-assessing. And this act of imagination is critical to the healthy functioning of a society.

Faith uniquely equips us for that process. And our faith in particular equips us for that process. In part, because faith is a good, stable foundation from which to look out, to interrogate, and to explore the world around us and to see how other people experience the world. We humbly receive the deposit of faith that has been guaranteed for us. And that provides us with the framework to imagine how others see the world, to examine our own faith, and to assess what might need to change. We can do this because our faith is one in which its basic content is nearly 2000 years old, and that built on stories and traditions of another 1000 years. The anchor of faith gives us the tool to do this without wandering too far, and without destroying the things that matter.

At the same time, Jesus emerges in the gospels as one who consistently and powerfully challenged so much of what his culture thought was important. He defied so many of the ideas and beliefs that even today people can cling to. So often Jesus is shown as one who subverts the values which made people feel safe and secure. Jesus' critique of power and money and wealth and prestige and legalism and appearances sting as much today as it did 2000 years ago.

But this *is not* because Jesus is some sort of radical or revolutionary. This is where the mission and message of Jesus is so often misunderstood. Jesus - in his own words - proclaims a kingdom, *not of this world*. His program *is not* political in nature. His concern to challenge and to change is so that we can share in the divine life. He is not an anarchist simply trying to destroy and tear down institutions and social mores. Jesus proposes a more humane way to live, and a way to live that prepares for a life of eternity with God. This is where the radicals and revolutionaries and anarchists fail. They mostly make life more miserable for people! And their sights are set firmly on the here and now. Jesus' message is not one of destruction, but of *restoration*. Restoring the image of God within us. Restoring right human relationships. And this restoration comes by freeing us - liberating us - from all those false gods, all those little idols, all those things which diminish us and distract us, but which are so incredibly resilient and seductive. And so, our disposition toward wealth, power, prestige, comfort, recognition, and hypocrisy we find so sharply critiqued by our Lord.

The issues we find addressed in the gospels so often speak directly to our world, to our context. It simply highlights the timelessness of the gospels and why we can trust them and take them seriously. But we can see from the gospel record that Jesus was an uncomfortable man to hang around! At one level deeply attractive - and refreshing - because he provided people with a new way of looking at the world, a new way of understanding and appreciating their relationship with God and each other. But on the other hand, so terribly disconcerting. Jesus was literally someone who would turn your world upside down.

The gospel writer Luke - whom we journey with this entire year - has this as a particular concern: Jesus who turns your world upside down. We see this thread come up again and again. At the start of the gospel in the song of Mary *the Magnificat*, Mary proclaims how God '*brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly. Who filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty*. In other words, God reverses the ordering of the world! The gospel writer Luke is pointing us to how Jesus' ministry will unfold; how the kingdom he announces will turn everything upside down! We see it in the Beatitudes. How peculiar it is that those who are poor, who mourn, who hunger and thirst, those who are persecuted and reviled are declared 'blessed' by our Lord. This is a challenge, if anything, to rethink where true blessedness comes. We see this message of challenge and reversal in his proposing

children as a model for the Kingdom, from a context in which children in the Greco-Roman world had no effective value. We see this message of challenge and reversal in Jesus' teaching on divorce. Again, not about proposing an impossible ideal. But about *restoring* the equality of the sexes, and so about *protecting* women from the whims of men. And we see this in his teaching about leadership. In the kingdom, leadership is not about executing power, but about service: the first becoming last.

And we see this of course in the gospel placed before us today. The challenge around honour, prestige, of preference, and of being noticed as pertinent today as ever. Today's gospel sees Jesus under scrutiny as he dines in the home of a leading Pharisee. Despite the hostility from his host, Jesus is not deterred from expressing his opinion and as usual he does so in the form of a story. He first addresses the guests and then the host. The *guests* are clearly not from the lower echelons of society. They are people who receive invitations to banquets where places of honour are reserved for the most distinguished guests. Jesus appeals to their fairly normal fear of being shamed before others. But he also reminds them of that principle of reversal in God's kingdom expressed as those who seek the first places find themselves last and the last are first. Jesus' advice for his *host* is more challenging. More than a reversal of values his suggestion seems to come from another world! Do not invite friends, family and wealthy neighbours! Invite instead the destitute and those with disabilities. In other words, invite those considered *unclean* rather than those who have the capacity to return hospitality. It reminds us we can only realise God's vision of the kingdom if we are prepared to have some of our values challenged and turned upside down.

Anglicans for a long time imagined there was a certain prestige attached to belonging to our church. Anglicans have liked to associate themselves with the establishment, with the ruling elite, with positions of power and responsibility. Well of course nowadays in this country none of that counts for anything much at all. But old associations can be hard to let go of. And they still linger. The gospel today should surely put an end to any of these old associations once and for all. Jesus' invitation to let go of certain ideas and behaviours we hold dear is simply so we can be better Christians and a better church. In large measures, Jesus' message is one of restoring right-order. Jesus' words of challenge and conviction are to highlight our disordered affections. But his invitation to turn our world upside down is really so that we can find ourselves standing the right way up. Amen.