

Sermon Ordinary Sunday 28 Year B 2021

Before I came to All Saints, at almost every funeral I celebrated, the well-known hymn Amazing Grace was requested. In a post-Christian world, we struggle to find something of the Christian culture which continues to connect with the wider culture. And like it or not, 'Amazing Grace' is one of the last vestiges of Christian culture which remains part of the language of the wider culture. Even though I've requested that it *not* be sung at my funeral, the background story is quite stirring: of John Newton who wrote the hymn, the slave trader who, caught in a ferocious storm on the sea, prayed to God, survived, and who gave up his old life to become an Anglican cleric. The hymn writer knew firsthand the power and might of God's 'amazing grace'.

So often though, even for the follower of Jesus - those of us called to be people of grace, trusting in grace, living in grace – so often we think we can do it on our own steam, by our own effort. It seems, that despite the talk, despite our own formative language, something keeps us back from the full implications of the life of grace. Even if grace is 'amazing' it is also terrifying! It means we have to accept that we cannot do it all, we cannot know it all, that we cannot save ourselves. There is something terrifying about grace because it means a new life. It means death to an old life. It means we have to accept the discomfort and chaos and ambiguity of giving birth to something new.

And so, even for the follower of Jesus, we can hold back. We accept Jesus, but on *our* terms. We accept Christ but only according to what our level of comfort and security can accept. The challenge of a totally new way of life is sometimes just a bit too destabilising so we settle for the familiar and the safe, where we know the rules. It is easy to follow a set of rules. Rules are helpful and important: put your seatbelt on! Don't get too close to the fire! Stop at the red light. Stay at home, stay away from others. Put your mask on. Get your job... Rules help us live in a safe and ordered society. But as good and helpful and well intentioned as they are, they cannot be all there is to living a full life. *Rules in themselves* won't help us be the fully alive human beings God desires us to be.

We heard it last week, how the Pharisees had the law - a set of rules - as their guide in relation to marriage and divorce. But the law wasn't enough. It missed the mark. So too again, as we come to the Gospel placed before us today: a rich man - perhaps with good intentions, a yearning heart, and a hungry spirit - coming to Jesus seeking eternal life. He recognises in Jesus someone who might be able to answer those questions of ultimate meaning we all struggle with. Jesus always starts with where *we* are at. He will always meet us on our way. He speaks our language, finds our common ground. And so, he asks the man what he knows of the commandments, to which the man can confidently say, that yes, he does know and has observed them since youth.

Someone *can* quite confidently and boldly say, '*yes, I have observed, followed and fulfilled all the commands.*' I hope we can say that. There might be a few hiccoughs along the way, but most of us, I imagine would be able to say that, or at least like to say that, yes, I have fulfilled the obligations of the law in, say, the Ten Commandments. The Ten Commandments, even for Christians, remains as some kind of moral benchmark; the basic minimum but also the ideal as well. It is not uncommon to hear, '*well if only people followed the Ten Commandments the world would be a much better place.*' They are probably right. It is not uncommon to hear people say that because they have followed the Ten Commandments then they are a '*good Christian*'. But is it enough?

We might hardly notice it, but perhaps to undercut the assumptions that can surround a code like the Ten Commandments (and to push the story along, to bring the man to where *Jesus* wants him), Jesus introduces a commandment *not* listed in the 'big ten': '*do not defraud.*' It is found in a couple of places in the Old Testament, and in those places it occurs as a warning against taking advantage of the vulnerable poor. It is a temptation to which the wealthy, even in our day and age (funnily enough), are particularly open to. In Roman-occupied first-century Judea, if a man had a lot of money, one could safely assume it was ill-gotten, that it had been acquired at the expense of others.

Now, having met him where he is; having spoken his language Jesus can now push a little further, direct him to where he wants him to go. He wants the man to see, that yes, his *thirst for life* has *not* been met in the law, in following rules. And so the crux of the story, the turning point, hitting him where it hurts: will the man leave that life behind, with all the status, security, interest, enjoyment it brings, in exchange for the life Christ offers? We know the tragic response. It is too much. He cannot accept the life of grace.

Later in the story, we hear Peter object: *how is this possible?!* To which Jesus says, *yes it is impossible for you*. It is impossible in our own strength, in your own pride. Yes, it is impossible if you are going to trust your rules and laws. *But it is not impossible with God*. It is possible by grace. Yes, it is possible to accept the call of Christ in all its terribleness and awfulness! The example of the saints shows us this. The saints are *ordinary* men and women who have simply accepted the call of grace. Countless holy men and women down the ages until our own day have indeed given up all, sold their possessions, given to the poor and offered their life totally in humble obedience to Christ. They show that it is possible.

It is possible but that doesn't make it easy. It is a costly faith! There are big demands in the gospel. I have spoken about this before: that a religion which does not ask very much of us, demands nothing of us, does not excite us to passion, commitment, generosity, expansiveness - a religion that is too safe and cosy and comfortable and familiar - will not be a faith that can hope to attract anyone. The faith that is worth believing in is one which invites a big, bold response. Now of course some will reject this, as the unnamed man in the gospel ultimately does. But if Christ had not asked him to confront this one obstacle, would it have been a faith worth having? Yet, the very example given us today is the very thing so many people *are* looking for in the world today: something big; a radical way of relating to each other; a radical way that liberates us from rules and conformity. Jesus offers a chance to give big, to respond to something completely.

It can take a while to accept all that. We would do well to take to heart that wherever we are on our journey, whatever our response might be, however much we struggle with where we are and where we are going, we can know that Jesus *looks at us and loves us*. (It is such an exquisite line of tenderness in the gospel today!) For all of us there are obstacles that prevent us from living the full life Christ offers. For the man in the gospel today it was his wealth. But all of us need to identify where we pull back, where we continue to rule, where we meet Christ but on our terms. But may we all learn to trust his voice, and despite our nervousness and uncertainties say that 'yes', in him all things *are possible*. Amen.