



Sermon: - 1st October 2017

An honest 'no' is better than a reluctant 'yes'!

Exodus 17: 1-7; Matthew 21: 23 -32

Recently I heard an old Jewish joke in which someone asks his rabbi, "Why do rabbis always answer a question with another question?" to which the rabbi replied, "Why shouldn't a rabbi answer a question with another question?"

Jesus, as we know, was a rabbi, and he had this particular gift down to a fine art. In fact, he was so good at it, that you do wonder why the chief priests kept asking him questions – you'd think they would learn! But no, here they are once again asking questions to which they don't get an answer. Or perhaps they do, but, as we've said before, good teaching practice doesn't hand you the answers on a plate, it makes you work them out for yourself. Today we have a tricky little problem, trying to work out what the first part of the passage we read has to do with the second part of passage, and then what does that have to do with us?

The gospel passage begins with the priests once again trying to trip Jesus up, trying to find reasons not to believe him, not to believe in him. But of course, Jesus sees right through their verbal traps and so he sets one for them. And then goes on to tell the story of the two sons. It seems, on first reading, as though it has nothing to do with the opening paragraph but in fact, here, Jesus is telling them that they are like the second son, saying all the right things but not actually doing anything. Elsewhere in the Gospels, the same picture is painted of religious observance which doesn't touch the heart and is therefore meaningless. This doesn't necessarily mean that people who major on religious observance are evil or worthless. I think what Jesus was saying was that their vision was too small. They weren't able to see what Jesus saw, the possibilities and potential in others. Their imaginations were too limited. Perhaps their view of what God could do had withered and so their attention was focussed on the wrong things.

Jesus then goes on to explain that there are many people in this world who are like the first son. They may not obey religious rules and regulations, in fact, they may even appear to have turned their back on God, but even in their apparent rebellion they are still capable of doing God's will, of expanding his kingdom. That's a particularly challenging thought for

us as we sit in church this morning. What does it mean to do God's will? Doesn't he want us to come to church? Doesn't he want us to pray and praise, to make our offerings, to read and listen and respond to his word? Of course he does, but of course, he wants more than that. He wants us to take what we hear in here out there.

Last Saturday night I was speaking to a friend who is involved in the World Mission Council. He was just back from a trip to China. He told me that the Church in China is growing, and growing very quickly. How, I asked him? He told me it's because people are loving their neighbours. That's all! People are being kind and helpful, visiting the sick and doing good whenever they can. And others are asking, "why are you doing this," and the reply of course is, "because I'm a Christian!" Now before you think that I'm suggesting that we don't do that, that's the last thing I'm suggesting. I think the people in this congregation are really good at looking out for others, at going the extra mile, at loving our neighbours, at putting faith into action. I suppose what I'm saying is, keep doing what you're doing, because you're taking the good news outside the walls.

For example, our Acts of Random Kindness, small though they may be, are also ways of taking the love of God outside the walls. We give people these little presents, they wonder why, and we say, we just want to tell you that God loves you! Each little gift that we hand out is a drop in the ocean, but many drops make an ocean!

And now we come to the responses of those two sons, one who said "yes" but didn't do what he said he would, one who said "no" but did what he was asked. We might be tempted to moralize it. We may assume its message is simply "Actions speak louder than words!" or "Don't be such a hypocrite!" or "Obey your father!" That seems like an obvious interpretation, but I think there's more to it than that.

The title of this sermon is, "An honest 'no' is better than a reluctant 'yes!'" And that is illustrated by this parable. I think this parable displays perfectly the contrariness of human nature. The first son says, "yes, I will go". Perhaps he almost immediately began to regret saying yes. His own cares and concerns suddenly seeming to weigh more heavily, his own deadlines looming larger, his other commitments suddenly seeming more demanding. And so this "yes" to his father becomes yet another burden. Does that sound familiar? How often have you said yes to something and as the time for you to make good on your commitment draws near you regret it?

A friend of mine once said to me, “beware distant elephants!” Oh yes... a commitment which seems quite small and insignificant in the distance looks large and daunting when you’re up close.

On the other hand, the second son says, “no”. And yet he goes and does what he was asked. Not having made the commitment, having avoided tying himself down, he finds that he has the time after all, that he has the desire after all, that he wants to do this for his father and is doing it out of love not out of necessity. An honest “no” has released him to do what his father asked, not out of a sense of obligation and therefore resenting it, but with gladness in his heart because it was not required of him. In the same way, I think we are more inclined to want to do something if we feel we have a choice in the matter and are not obliged to do it.

I have many little mantras, but one of them is, “do what you can, not what you can’t!” In other words, only take on the things you can do, that will give you energy and inspire you, rather than being “guilt-tripped” into doing things that are actually too much for you. And that’s another way of expressing the truth behind this parable today. Here in Campsie there are many tasks which need to be done to keep this church community alive and well and functioning, and, indeed, flourishing. Some of them are large and some of them are small but if everybody does something small, I think the large ones will somehow find themselves being attended to anyway. We have challenges in Campsie. We are small congregation and more than 50% of the congregation are retired. You know that we are financially challenged and of course we are having the gift day next week. But I believe that we can do it! We can make the church in this community count. If each of us does a small thing to add to the whole. If we look for that small thing that God is asking of us. Over the coming weeks we’ll be looking for volunteers to do lots of small things. The aim is to make all the tasks that need to be done either short-term commitments or small commitments so that nothing is too much of a burden. I hope that each of us will find amongst the tasks which need to be done some small thing that we can do with gladness in our hearts, for love of Jesus, without resentment, or guilt, for the good of the church here in Lennoxton, for the good of the kingdom!

Just as we finish, I have one more thing to draw out from the passages today. Sometimes the passages linked together in the lectionary seem to have nothing in common. Sometimes I struggle to see what was in the editors’ minds when they chose certain passages. But for me this morning there is a clear link between Exodus and the gospel. In

the Exodus reading God provides living water from a rock. What this says to me is that even in the midst of apparent scarcity God can provide. And in this context, when we look to the gospel passage, God provided for the first son. He said, "no". But then God provided, the time, the will, the impetus, the commitment, even when it seemed to be absent, the desire to help. And so, this morning, let's all think about what we can do for God here in Lennoxton. Let's try not to be overwhelmed by the task, but instead think, what small thing can I do that would contribute to the greater whole. Unlike the two sons in the parable, let's not say "yes" if we would rather say "no", and let's not say "no" if in fact we are able to say "yes"! Let's allow God to inspire us, help us, equip us. Let's find the thing that we can do that will give us energy and joy so that the kingdom of God may expand in our hearts and in this place..