

Turn, then and live.

This morning is Social Justice Sunday as designated by the National Council of Churches and this year the focus has been placed upon prisoners and all those who are imprisoned. Our readings are not overtly about imprisonment but there are themes of judgement and self imposed oppression or freedom running through.

The parable this morning is one of those very short apparently simple ones that with time and reflection grow in significance. Matthew's gospel continues his perennial theme of Israel missing the point, of not heeding the prophets, and of there being a harsh judgement upon those who had the message of life in their midst but did not heed it. Again and again we are reminded that the religiously righteous and smug missed the point and will now miss out on the experience of the kingdom of God whilst the poor and dubious will experience the kingdom.

So what do these ancient words have to say to us today of life?

Those of us who are comfortable members of the established church often have reason to squirm in our seats while listening to Matthew. But the parable with its warning also tells us good news that we can change our minds and our ways, that we are not doomed by our first words and actions.

How often do we say Yes to what we think we should, only to find that we do not automatically do what we say, what we know we should and could do and be? The spiritual journey, especially for those who have grown up in the church with the wisdom of Christ always near, often brings us to a spoken Yes, to the knowledge of where and what we should be about. But something then prevents us from doing wholeheartedly that which we know we should. How often do we say with our lips that we believe that God is the creator of all things and then go home and act as though some aspects of creation are more important than others, indeed we often act as though some of creation is dispensable! Or how often do we say that we know that God does not take pleasure in the death of anyone and then watch the evening news unmoved, or even a little triumphant, when people not like us die in famines or wars far from us? Or even more simply how often do we say with our lips that we will pray for each other and then when we say our prayers do not remember many more than our own children and most immediate loved ones?

All of us, I suspect, are a little like the second son who says Yes to what we think is right but do not do the work of our Father. So what then are we to make of the first son who says No but then goes and does what is right? What does it mean to say No to what will eventually be our life's work?

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Based on Ezekiel 18:1-4, 25-32; Psalm 25:1-9; Philippians 2:1-13; and Matthew 21:23-32.

I wonder if that is not like the process of truth telling to the self? To tell the truth of our resistance, fear, disinterest, laziness – our “No” - when confronted with the call to work. And that something about telling that unattractive truth begins to set us free to find our way to the “Yes” that is within us.

And here our reading from Philippians may point us to how to reach the Yes needed. To be fully present even Jesus the Christ had to empty himself.

This is understood in other traditions as well. A lovely story from our Eastern brothers and sisters. “A woodcarver named Ching had just finished work on a bell frame. Everyone who saw it marvelled, for it seemed to be the work of spirits. When the Duke of Lu saw it, he asked, ‘What sort of genius is yours that you could make such a thing?’ The woodcarver replied, ‘Sire, I am only a simple workman. I am no genius. But there is one thing. When I am going to make a bell frame I meditate for three days to calm my mind. When I have mediated for three days, I think no more about rewards or emoluments. When I have meditated for five days, I no longer think of praise or blame, skilfulness or awkwardness. When I have meditated for seven days I suddenly forget my limbs, my body; no, I forget my very self. I lose consciousness of the court and my surroundings. Only my skill remains. In that state I walk into the forest and examine each tree until I find one in which I see the bell frame in all its perfection. Then my hands go to the task. Having set my self aside, nature meets nature in the work that is performed through me. This, no doubt, is the reason why everyone says that the finished product is the work of spirits.’ “

Meditation, prayer, the great spiritual disciplines of the ages all can assist us to empty ourselves and to find the Yes within. And so can engagement with social justice. We can move from No to God’s way of living to Yes when we empty ourselves of the false separations between us and others. When we no longer focus on what is different between us and the imprisoned – those in prisons, detention centres, psychiatric hospitals, re-education centres. When we can look at a prisoner and see ourselves. When we can identify what imprisons us. We begin to empty ourselves of false divisions and protections and become available to others and to God. God who already waits in the prison, in the hospital bed, in the tomb. When we confess the No but turn up anyway we begin to empty ourselves and make room for God and God’s good priorities and gifts. When we give ourselves over and away we can begin to know ourselves differently. When we allow the least and the unlikely to teach and to give.

And again and again we are given the opportunity to turn, and live. If we but have the eyes and the ears we are each other’s Yes, each others opportunity, each other’s work and each other’s gift.

Even so, come Lord Jesus Christ.