

Sermon Philippians 2 1-13; Matthew 21 23-32

In the parable we've just heard – in which the Father and the vineyard can be seen as representing God and the world - Jesus asks: by what criteria should we judge whether we are aligning ourselves with the will of God? How ought we to live? One brother pays lip service to doing as his father asks, but doesn't act; in contrast, the other one appears to reject the commission, but ends up doing his father's bidding and tending the vineyard. In this thinly-veiled attack on the Pharisees, Jesus implies that the most unlikely people he encounters - the tax collectors and prostitutes – the stigmatised of their day – are closer to God than those who appear outwardly virtuous. The Pharisees hear Jesus on an abstract and theoretical level, whereas those who really start to listen to God have undergone a complete change of heart. The pattern we see illustrated in today's Gospel resonates throughout much of the church, both past and present. The emphasis has been on believing the right things rather than how you really act - although it's fair to say that the Church of England is a comparatively broad church and one that historically has not wished to 'make a window into the soul'

'I will sir', the boy replied but did not go (to work in the vineyard). 'I will not', the other son replied, but afterwards he changed his mind and went. 'Which of the two did what his father wanted? Jesus asks the Pharisees - and us. Jesus makes it very clear in this Gospel - you can say all the right words, but if you don't do it, it's meaningless. Those considered outcasts, he says, have believed and acted on John the Baptist's message, but those considered the religious experts of their time have ignored it. John is Jesus' herald: both preach the message to 'Repent for the Kingdom of Heaven has come near.' If Jesus seems to put so little emphasis on being theoretically 'on message', what is the kernel of discipleship: what does it mean to follow Christ? Most especially, what might it mean to follow him *now*, in this time of great uncertainty, suffering for so many of body, mind and spirit - and polarisation?

'He was in the form of God, yet he laid no claim to equality with God, but made himself nothing, assuming the form of a slave...bearing the human likeness, sharing the human lot, he humbled himself and was obedient, even to the

point of death, death on a cross... Look to each other's interests and not merely to your own.' The passage from Philippians encapsulates what the self-emptying love of Christ looks like; a love that is recognised by its giving itself away again and again; expending itself utterly; that the created world might be reconciled through the one whose meaning was love. None of us can live like this; yet the call to love is surely a path to an ever-wider spiritual horizon, not about a joyless requirement to 'measure up'. One writer has pointed out that the traditional Creed does not once mention the word 'love'; it's all about believing ideas. And although creeds help give our faith a structure, they have arisen from an inheritance of experiences of God and Christ rather than coming first. The core of our belief is that God is love and that love transfers to us - however dimly and imperfectly. The way others can tell we really worship God is if God rubs off on you and you become loving too - or want to - which is really the same thing. And especially in this time when coming to church or worshipping at home are both particularly challenging, I'm sure you wouldn't be here now if you didn't want to live out that love in the world.

How, then, can we recognise the love of Christ in our current context? . 'Wherever love is, God is', the first letter of John states simply. Love one another, Jesus tells the disciples; be merciful; forgive others; trust in God; return evil with good; do not be anxious. This brings to mind one theologian's belief that 'The Christian life is as simple and challenging as this: to love God and all that God loves.' Like the Brexit debate, the current pandemic has polarised opinion, so that sometimes anyone challenging restrictions has been accused of selfishness or stupidity; a 'Covidiot' ; and those who are seen as overly cautious are criticised for their timidity. Labelling others like this makes it easier to treat those we disagree with as undeserving of our care and compassion; outside our circle of concern; beyond the pale. This is far from Jesus' call to love our neighbour as ourselves- whether or not we find our neighbour easy to love. Can we try to see those we disagree with through the eyes of the God of complete and unconditional love? It is easier to believe there are black and white solutions to the circumstances we are in, than to acknowledge that truth may be far more elusive - and that the views of those we disagree with have often been forged by painful experiences.

Care homes have been largely closed to visitors since March in order to protect the residents from Coronavirus - and given the appalling death toll, that may seem an obvious decision to have made. But if you have a loved one in a care home who you have hardly seen for six months, who is desperately missing family; as well as not having seen a hairdresser or chiropodist since before the Spring, not to mention a face to face visit from the doctor or the Care Quality Commission: is the policy so clearly the right one? If you are a student who has just started a university where there are Coronavirus outbreaks, it may seem clear cut that you shouldn't socialise outside your household, let alone go to the pub, or go home. But what if you're desperately lonely, or have mental health problems - not to mention paying an ill-afforded £9000 for this student 'experience'? Are you to remain separated from your family now, and even over Christmas, because your sacrifice is worth it to possibly increase the safety of the herd?

These are not easy decisions - and that is the point; when we stray outside theory and abstraction, we are forced to confront the complexity and pain involved in each unique situation. So with seeking to follow Christ; surface assent and saying all the right words costs little; confronting actual suffering and pain; acknowledging the complications of others' lives; being willing to voice views that may make us unpopular - in other words, seeking to follow Christ in the world in which we find ourselves - is another matter. The Gospels abound with situations where Jesus defied the black and white truths of his day: healing on the Sabbath; mixing with those considered unclean; declaring that prostitutes and tax collectors were closer to God than religious officials. There are also many examples in the Gospels of people, particularly those in power, trying to pin Jesus down: should we obey Caesar?; by what authority do you act?; how can it be lawful to heal on the Sabbath? Jesus' response is often to illustrate the deeper implications of the question by seeming to answer a different one - as in today's gospel.

At a time where so there are so many competing voices shouting for our attention; anxious voices; angry voices; voices longing for a certainty that does not exist - can we listen for God's 'still small voice of calm'? Can we pray that we would look on others, not through the lazy lenses of judgement and

criticism, but more and more clearly through Christ's gaze of infinite love and compassion with which He looks on each and every one of us? Amen.

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