

2023 September 3rd - Thirteenth Sunday after Trinity.

Exodus 3:1-15; Psalm 115;

Romans 12:9-end; Matthew 16:21-28.

Last week everything was looking good. The disciples had made the link between Jesus' words and those of the prophets who came before him, they realised that when he spoke he spoke God's word. And then Peter made the miraculous leap of faith: Jesus didn't just say God's words, Jesus *IS* God's Word. When Jesus speaks he is God's own words entering our ears directly with no mediator.

The problem is that God's words to us are often uncomfortable. Yes, God's words reveal to us the depth and breadth and height of his love for us; they open to us the glorious riches of God's heaven and God's earth; they draw us into his very presence. But they also hold up a mirror to ourselves. Whenever we hear God's promises to us and rejoice in them, we also remember how we have squandered God's goodness towards us, wasted his provision for us, denied his love for us, and very often prevented others from receiving his goodness love and mercy. When God speaks we know joy and sorrow, penitence and pardon, sin and salvation.

And so, Jesus has to warn his disciples. Because Jesus is God's Word the world will reject him. Whilst it was the hands of some particular religious leaders, political leaders and soldiers, living in a particular time and place who condemned, tried and crucified Jesus, it could have been anyone in any time, it is everyone in every time, it's me and you, too, my brothers and sisters, who can't stand the discomfort of seeing and hearing God's word and who crucified Jesus. As Johann Heermann (translated by Robert Bridges) wrote

Ah, holy Jesus, how hast thou offended,
that we to judge thee have in hate pretended?
By foes derided, by thine own rejected, O most afflicted!
Who was the guilty? Who brought this upon thee?
Alas, my treason, Jesus, hath undone thee!
'Twas I, Lord Jesus, I it was denied thee; I crucified thee.

But that's too much to bear. How can it be me? I don't want to be associated with this. Don't let it be true. If I am vehement enough in my denial, maybe I can excuse myself from his betrayal. That's what Peter does. "Surely not, Jesus" he says, "we can't let this happen to you."

And that's when Jesus said "Get behind me, Satan." How shocking. Jesus has just called Peter "Satan", and yet, surely, Peter was just trying to express his love for Jesus. Why did Jesus do this?

The Satan is the title for someone who turns up in the Old Testament. He is a trickster and a liar, he tries to prevent people seeing the true God by distorting their image and understanding of God and of themselves and of the relationship between God and his people. He tries to trick Job into cursing God, but he fails. Here the Satan is trying to use Peter to trick God the Son. If Jesus goes along with Peter, if Jesus allows Peter's shock and horror to deflect him from his path, if Jesus allows Peter to protect him, hide him away from the elders and chief priests and scribes, the governor and centurions and soldiers, if Jesus lets Peter have his way, then Jesus will not fulfil his Father's purpose of bringing salvation to the world, taking the weight of the world's sin on his shoulders,

Lo, the Good Shepherd for the sheep is offered;
the slave hath sinned, and the Son hath suffered.

For our atonement, while we nothing heeded, God interceded.

Jesus was tempted, but without sin. Jesus turns down the offer of an alternative to God's will and way, just as he did when the devil tempted him, fasting, in the wilderness.

For me, kind Jesus, was thy incarnation,
thy mortal sorrow, and thy life's oblation;
thy death of anguish and thy bitter passion,
for my salvation.

Our salvation is wholly dependent on Jesus; our safety lies in accepting his words, even when they are hard to hear and to live out. Although we, like Peter, might prefer to travel a different route, in the end we must accept the way of the cross, for Jesus and for us.

Therefore, kind Jesus, since I cannot pay thee,
I do adore thee, and will ever pray thee,
think on thy pity and thy love unswerving, not my deserving.

A setting of the hymn "Ah, holy Jesus"

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=s4MKOP-vhQ0>

Image: Mary, cradling her dead Son. Giovanni Bellini; Pietà; Venice, Gallerie dell'Accademia.



2023 September 10th - Fourteenth Sunday after Trinity.

Exodus 12:1-14; Psalm 149;

Romans 13:8-end; Matthew 18:15-20.

When I was preparing this Sunday's readings I read a commentary by the excellent New Testament scholar NT Wright. He focussed on the difficulty we have reconciling disagreements. It is true that we are often not good at disagreement or reconciliation. It is true that unreconciled disagreement underlies many terrorist attacks. It is true that relationships are broken when we paper over the cracks, pretend there is nothing wrong and fail to seek reconciliation. If you have a disagreement with someone, I commend his advice to you (you can find it in *Matthew for Everyone, part 2*, pages 33-37).

The only problem is, I think this passage is about more than reconciliation and forgiveness. Jesus talks about sin, not just disagreement, however severe. He says "if a Christian brother or sister sins against you, this is what you are to do...". It seems that the sin has happened in private, if not in secret, because first we are told to speak to the sinner alone. However, if the sinner refuses to acknowledge the sin and refuses to repent, Jesus instructs us to take further action, growing more and more public until, ultimately, the sinner might be cast out of the church. This isn't just about a disagreement, but about a situation of real harm.

Jesus is talking about the Church, a community of believers, but I think his words may be applicable in other situations, anywhere that a group or community of people are gathered round a common purpose.

I don't know how often the initial one-to-one approach works, but I do know that at least sometimes it doesn't work, and the sin and the impact of the sin ends up going public. I'm writing this in August, and of course, in the news just this past month, we've heard about safeguarding issues in the church, abuse in the medical profession and bullying in the police force. In all these cases what started as an individual calling out sin has escalated to a public condemnation of bad, even criminal behaviour.

Jesus' instructions to the Church, applicable to any community, should offer a way to identify and deal with sin. However, Jesus' words can be taken and twisted by people so that they support the sinner and oppress the victim. Earlier this summer at a Safeguarding Leaders discussion I heard about a situation in which a bullying organisation had said "well, the complainant didn't raise this concern with the individual who had

harmed them, nor with the leadership team, nor with the national or international organisation, therefore there can't really have been a problem". This employer (well resourced, with access to top-ranking legal advice) had turned Jesus' words upside down so that rather than defending the weaker party who had suffered abuse they were protecting the stronger party so that they could continue their bullying.

Sometimes it is not possible for the victim of the sin to confront the sinner. They may be too frightened, they may be in real danger if they speak out. Think of the women speaking out against oppression in Afghanistan, or of Russians speaking out against Mr Putin's war with Ukraine, or looking back, the protestors speaking out in the so called "Arab Spring" or at Tiananmen Square. These brave protestors put themselves, and sometimes their family, in danger. Not everyone can do that.

No-one should be condemned to suffer abuse because they cannot speak directly to the abuser. Jesus' words are the ideal, but we cannot allow abusers to make them a further burden for their victims. If you or someone you know is suffering abuse, is being sinned against by another, whether that is a fellow Christian, family member, work-colleague or boss, please try to tell someone. Don't feel that because you can't speak out to your oppressor or abuser you won't be believed. If you dare not go to the police or social services, talk to Anne Mary or to me. Jesus' words should set us free; those of us who are free should never allow others to use Jesus' words for abusing, controlling or coercing others.



Information and support for people suffering from domestic abuse.

<https://www.nhs.uk/live-well/getting-help-for-domestic-violence/>

<https://www.womensaidnel.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/Safety-Planning-Feb11.pdf>

<https://www.thehotline.org/plan-for-safety/create-your-personal-safety-plan/>

Image: Mary, cradling her Son who had suffered abuse at the hands of legally appointed officials. Giovanni Bellini; Pietà; Venice, Gallerie dell'Accademia.

2023 September 17th - Fifteenth Sunday after Trinity.

Exodus 14:19-31; Psalm 114;

Romans 14:1-12; Matthew 18:21-35.

I wonder what you think of the confession and absolution in church? Is it a bit perfunctory: the congregation say “sorry”, the priest says “God forgives you” and everyone carries on as if nothing ever happened. But that’s not really what is going on. In church we spend a few minutes summing up our recognition of our sin, but actually we confess our sins beforehand, knowing that God longs to forgive us.

I don’t suppose any of us is really good at owning up to sin. I think it’s probably easier with the really “big” sins; if you’d murdered someone, you’d probably want to confess because the weight of sin would be so heavy. But most of us aren’t murderers. The sins we have on our conscience are usually small and petty: unkind words or thought, minor injustice, small oversights or failures to do what is right. We’re very good at justifying our sins to ourselves, we might have been unkind to this or that person, but really, they had tried our patience beyond all reasonable bounds, they *deserved* our cutting comment or thought, and so on. We may not be big sinners because we don’t do “big” sins, but we’re probably big sinners because we do a lot of “little” sins.

So, each of us needs daily (hourly, sometime even minute by minute!) to be repenting of our sins and seeking forgiveness so that when we come to church we will be ready to hear the words of forgiveness in the absolution.

“May the Almighty and merciful Lord grant you pardon and remission of all your sins, time for amendment of life, and the grace and comfort of the Holy Spirit.” These words of absolution look back to what we have done, and promise that the stain of that sin can be removed from us, but it also looks forward to the rest of our lives, offering us the gift of the Holy Spirit to help us change.

The desire to change is at the heart of penitence and forgiveness. If we say sorry without any intention to change our behaviour, we’re not really sorry at all. If we intend to change our behaviour without seeking God’s help, we probably won’t manage it. After all, if most people find it hard to stick to a diet, will-power alone is unlikely to change us into good and godly people. To be good and godly we need our good God to remake us in his image, and we need to co-operate with him.

Our Gospel today focussed the need for those of us who have been forgiven to forgive others. Sadly, that Gospel has been used to hurt and oppress people. I have been shocked, horrified, appalled to hear people say that their church ministers have told them that they must forgive an abusive partner, and go back to them because Jesus told us to forgive “70x7” (an idiom meaning “every single time”). Anyone, of any age, gender, sexual orientation, level of education, or social class could be the victim of domestic abuse; no-one of any age, gender, sexual orientation, level of education or social class should think that they can get away with domestic abuse.

If someone uses this Gospel to say that you must forgive, forget and go back to an abusive relationship, they are abusing the Gospel - and you. Receiving forgiveness requires the desire and action to amend life. If the offender does not amend their life and seek God’s grace, they cannot receive the forgiveness offered and so their relationship with the person they have abused is broken. Even if they have a sincere desire to amend their lives, that doesn’t mean that they have a right to remain in relationship with the person they have abused. Forgiveness does not mean that the forgiver is a doormat or a punch-bag.



If someone is hurting you, please try to tell someone - Anne Mary or me, the police or your GP, a friend or family member. We want a world where there is nowhere for abusers to hide, not in the home, the workplace or in church. If you are being abused you are not to blame, you do not need to seek forgiveness, please believe that there are people who will seek safety for you for the sake of our loving God.

An image of Mary, cradling her Son who had suffered abuse at the hands of legally appointed officials. Giovanni Bellini; Pietà; Venice, Gallerie dell'Accademia.

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2023 September 24th - Sixteenth Sunday after Trinity.

Exodus 16:2-15; Psalm 105:37-45;
Philippians 1:21-30; Matthew 20:1-16.

How do you feel if someone pushes in front of you in a queue? Yes, I feel like that too! Would you ever complain to the queue-jumper? No, I probably wouldn't either, I'd just complain to anyone else who would listen to me! (Kate Fox has written a book called *Watching the English: the hidden rules of English behaviour* which has quite a bit about our response to queue jumping!)

We don't like queue-jumpers and pushers-in. They offend against our sense of fairness, our feeling that everyone should earn what they get and get what they earn and receive their just deserts; our feeling that being first and waiting longest should be rewarded in some way.

Jesus' story about the labourers in the vineyard picks up on that feeling that he who comes first, tries hardest, works longest should be most rewarded - especially when we are the ones who have come first, tried hardest and worked the longest. We deserve the best, we're worth it.



In the Middle East, in Jesus' time and still today, manual workers are often hired by the day. The workers go to the market place and stand around waiting to be hired. The employer goes to look them over and choose who he will employ: he's looking for people who are fit and keen, he's looking for the people who are ready first thing in the morning and who look strong enough to work a long day in

the heat. And so, in Jesus' story the landowner hires men first thing in the morning for the usual wage. So far, so normal. What is surprising is that the landowner keeps going out on and off throughout the day and hiring more men. Unusual, but maybe he had a particularly large vineyard.

Towards the ends of the afternoon he finds a group of men who have waited all day at the market place and not been hired. These were the scrapings of the labour-market barrel, no-one else wanted to employ them. Everyone else thought that they weren't up to the job because they were too old, or sick, or weak, or young, or for some reason not quite what was wanted in the workplace. But the landowner does hire them, even though there is only one hour left until clocking-off time.

The landowner pays the men he hired last a full days' wages. What a generous man! And, of course, those hired first think "well, if he paid them a day's wages

for one hour, what will he pay us for a full working day? Could this be wealth at last for me!" And the answer to the question of what he would pay those who'd worked all day was that he paid them the going rate as they'd already agreed. He paid them a day's wage for a day's work.

Were they right to be offended? We might know in our heads that they got what they deserved, but I expect in our hearts we have some sympathy with them. Somehow it doesn't seem fair that the last lot of labourers got paid the same as the men who'd worked all day. It doesn't seem fair that the newcomer is appreciated as much as the old hand. It's like that feeling we get when we face a queue-jumper, or a pusher-in. We take the part of the ones who waited and worked patiently all day and we feel that they somehow deserve more than these latecomers.

The landowner says "My money; my rules. Are you annoyed because I'm generous and give to everyone? You haven't lost out because I've paid the others the same as I paid you; you've got everything you need, and so have these late-comers."

Jesus tells this parable just after two contrasting encounters, the first with children who are welcomed into his kingdom, the second with a rich young man who can't bear to give up his wealth to follow Jesus and build up treasure in heaven. Jesus says that it's easier for a camel to go through the eye of the needle than for a rich man to enter heaven, and so many who are first (who think that they are rich, important, who somehow deserve something from God) will be last, and many who are last (who doubt that they have any right to call on God's mercy, who doubt that God would welcome them) will be first. Jesus points out that God's love is for all, whether people have known God all their lives or only all of five minutes.

God's first people were the Jews, the descendants of Abraham and Isaac and Jacob. They are the old-hands, the people who had been promised God's reward. We are the newcomers, the ones who have come late to the gate of God's house. We do not "deserve" much from God, and yet God offers us his salvation which is priceless and cannot be earned. In this parable we are the latecomers, hired at the end of the day. When we are tempted to get annoyed because someone new to church seems to be treated as just as important as us, whether they are new to the village or new to the faith, or someone who has only come to church because they want a wedding or a baptism or somewhere dry to sit on a Sunday morning, when we are tempted to get annoyed because someone new is treated as if they are important and we who have been here for years feel comparatively ignored, maybe we need to remember this story. It's changed my way of thinking, perhaps it will change yours too.

Image: labourers gleaning in the field. detail from Nicolas Poussin; Summer (Boaz and Ruth). Louvre, Paris.

