

JESUS ALWAYS SEE MORE IN US THAN WE DO!

(Sermon for Pentecost 15 - Vocations Sunday – 22/9/18 – Luke 16:1-13)

Today has been designated Vocations Sunday by the Bishop. This is very appropriate because yesterday was the feast day of St Matthew, one of the foremost disciples of Jesus. Matthew was a person who could be considered least likely to be a good candidate as a follower of Christ. He was a hated tax-collector, a collaborator with the Roman occupiers of Israel in collecting monies for Rome, and so he was almost certainly not religious as he would have been most unwelcome in the local synagogue.

Why did Jesus call him to God's ministry? Not a worthy popular candidate for ministry one would have thought. But Jesus did call him to leave his tax booth and follow him. Amazingly, he did just that and Matthew became a great leader of the early church. The Gospel that bears his name is witness to how important Matthew was to the early Christian Community and especially to the discipleship group of Christ that formed around him as their mentor and guide. This discipleship group almost certainly gave rise to Matthew's Gospel that probably contains much of what Matthew remembered and had told his discipleship group and that one of them later wrote up under his name.

Jesus Christ often calls unlikely people into his fellowship of faith. The history of the Church is evidence of that. Some of us he calls to greater ministry, like indeed he once called me from outside the church into his discipleship. We all need to ask what is Jesus actually calling each of us to do. Some of you have responded in a variety of ways of service to his call and some of you perhaps may still be uncertain of what is your calling or how you are to respond. Don't be put off by a feeling of unworthiness. Christ sees in us much more than we do ourselves and can call out of us much more than we may think possible.

If you come to church regularly and have listened closely to the Gospel readings, you will know that there seem to be four really significant issues that Jesus is concerned about and sought to publicly challenge. The first is that of religious and moral hypocrisy, and sadly we see, as Jesus certainly did, so much of that in the political and religious institutional realities of our world today. The second issue is the destructive power of selfishness and the widespread belief that self-fulfilment is the only thing that matters. The third issue for Jesus is our attitude towards the seductive and dangerous power of money and of greed. And the fourth issue is the overwhelming importance of justice and care for the poor and outcast and oppressed, no matter the social or legal constraints. This last issue is certainly a major concern today for so many seeking places of security and safety after fleeing their homelands or who flee abusive relationships and families. Indeed, many of the tragic news reports today have at least one of these four concerns of Jesus at their root.

The Gospels tell many wonderful parables, which are stories with a sting in their tail, which were told by Jesus to both teach and challenge his hearers. Luke's Gospel, which is the Gospel for today's reading, contains the greatest number of these parables and probably the most memorable. He was a Greek Gentile and a well-educated doctor who became an

early Christian convert. He had obviously listened to many of these parables from the disciples of Jesus and had sifted through them for the best to include in his Gospel. Many of the parables are concerned with the negative power of greed and the subtle, destructive lure of money and wealth: for example there are the parable of the rich and foolish landowner; the parable of the prodigal son; the parable of the rich man and of poor Lazarus dying at his gate; and the parable of the unused talents.

Jesus says: *“Take care. Be on your guard against all kinds of greed and selfishness, for life does not consist in the abundance of possessions alone.”*

Most of Jesus’ parables stress the virtues of good and wise stewardship, of being generous and hospitable people, and of financial accountability and responsibility. All important attributes for a Christian vocational calling.

However, today’s Gospel is a little different and unusual. Jesus actually seems to praise the very questionable virtues of being a sneak and a fraudster and opportunist – a scammer if you like!! In this Gospel parable, the dishonest manager steals from his employer for his own ends and is reckless with his boss’s money. Then, when his deception and skulduggery is found out, he cleverly cuts a deal with those who owe the boss lots of money in the hope of cutting his losses and those of his boss. In the end, the boss actually praises the prompt if questionable dealings of his dishonest manager. Jesus also, at the end of the parable, gives the usual sting in the tail by appearing to praise the dishonest steward.

Jesus says: *“For the children of this age are more shrewd in dealing with their own generation than the children of light.”*

Then, right at the end of today’s Gospel, are two verses that don’t seem to fit at all with what goes before. Jesus says: *“How can a person who cannot be trusted with worldly wealth be entrusted with the treasures of heaven?”* and *“You cannot serve both God and mammon”*

Mammon is from an Aramaic word that means self-focused covetousness or greed. These couple of verses seem as though they might have been tacked on by the author of the Gospel of Luke from sayings of Jesus from elsewhere. This is possibly because the Gospel writer was a bit uncomfortable with what he saw as the unacceptability of Jesus’ original story. However, I find Jesus’ parable quite challenging and impressive and the sort of thing Jesus may have actually said because of its outlandish nature. Jesus was nothing if not challenging to people’s current accepted views. The outrageousness of Jesus commending the manager’s dishonesty says something I think about Jesus’ acceptance of people where they are and where they can begin to grow to.

After all the primary purpose of God sending his Son into the world in the human form of Jesus to then be used and abused and tortured and killed by humankind, was to experience the worst and the fulness of people’s traumatic and dysfunctional lives and so to redeem all humankind. It is part of human nature to be open to the dangers and freedom of willful and

sinful living. In Jesus, we can learn to transcend our own tendency to greed and selfishness and sinfulness. This is what Christian faith and living is all about.

One of the greatest complaints about Jesus by the so-called righteous and religious people of his day was that Jesus was a friend to sinners and the outcasts of society. He openly shared God's love and compassion and forgiveness with them. And perhaps this is the actual point of the parable in the Gospel today. The manager is dishonest. He is a liar and a cheat and a fraud. Yet he does partially redeem himself by calling in his master's bad debtors and reducing their debt so that they can pay it back and it is a win-win situation for everyone involved. His boss gets back some of his lost money, the debtors are grateful to be relieved of the full burden of their debt, and the manager gets the thanks from both. Jesus says that the boss calls in this conniving employee and says: "Well done, and great work you little crook. At least you showed initiative and creativity in the tight spot you were in."

The manager is not really commended for his dishonesty, but he was commended for his shrewdness and quick-wittedness to make the best of a bad situation. All of us in reality no doubt have our embarrassing secrets and darker sides. We all have our times of anger and lack of ability to forgive, our times of selfishness and greed, our times of desire for revenge and of envy and perhaps of lust. Why would Jesus seem to take such delight in the shenanigans of this little devious crook? Maybe, it is precisely because Jesus is the sort of Saviour who was and is willing to die for us all, no matter who or what we may be. Jesus sees the great possible good in all of us.

Jesus was crucified between two condemned criminals and perhaps this is a symbol of Jesus love for all humanity. As he dies, Jesus commends at least one of them by saying today you will with me in Paradise. Jesus came so that each one of us may aspire to follow his example and to seek his empowering love and guidance and wisdom to be the redeemed people of God as we juggle our responses to all the difficulties and traumas and seductions of life.

If Jesus only came to save the perfectly good then none of us would have any hope! Jesus clearly came to call us all into his Kingdom. We all have a vocation to fulfil as we follow that call and for some of us that vocation may in fact be to some form of lay or ordained ministry in the Church of God. Going back to the theme of this sermon: Jesus always see more in us than we do! Thanks be to God!