

## **What do a potential politician, a recently retired professional and a thief have to tell us about righteousness?**

Readings: Gen 15: 1-6; Luke 12: 32-40

This week I was speaking to a leader from another denomination on the Island. It was a stimulating conversation that included local politics. I asked whether he had ever considered standing as a member of our parliament. He said he'd been asked a number of times, once by a group of MHKs. He told them that he would stand if they could answer one question for him. My mind was racing as I wondered what that question would be. It was:

“Do you think this Island is ready for the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth?”

Their silence gave him the answer he had expected.

Also this week I bumped into a recently retired professional. He said that earlier in his career he had been asked to retract a letter. He refused, saying that its contents were true. He reckoned that once you have done something that is not right, others have a degree of control over you. If you question bad practice, they can threaten to expose what you have done and so a cartel of silence ensues with bad practices continuing.

I was saddened to think that our Island life might be permeated by such a culture. Surely if our faith means anything to us we should stand up for what is right.

I wonder – what do you understand by the word Righteousness? There are many references in the Bible to the Righteousness of God. It is one of his characteristics, and reflects his justice. Against his character our sense and practice of justice often falls short.

You may remember that Jesus said: *For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven* (Matt 5:20).

And that was a big ask. For the Pharisees had developed very clear guidelines about how to behave as they interpreted the 10 commandments for their daily lives. For example, one of the 10 commandments reminds us to keep the Sabbath holy and do no work. In a rural society such as in first century Palestine, ploughing, sowing and harvesting were clearly work. But Jesus'

disciples were condemned when they were spotted taking a few grains from a head of barley, rubbing them in their hands to remove the husk and then eating them not for stealing but for winnowing – separating the grain from the husk ((Luke 6: 1+2).

The Pharisees had fallen into the trap of Self-righteousness - making a list of rules (albeit from their scriptures and oral tradition) and congratulating themselves on how well they were doing in comparison to others.

However hard any of us tries, we can never equal the goodness or righteousness of God.

Our Old Testament reading is about Abraham, the ancestor recognised by Jews, Muslims and Christians. Abraham had a definite call from God to leave the place where he was living and to set out to an unknown land. He took up the challenge and led a nomadic life through modern day Israel, down into Egypt and back again. He got involved in a battle, rescuing his nephew who'd been taken captive. Abraham refused to keep any booty for himself. It was at this point in his story that our reading fits in. God reassures Abraham, telling him not to be afraid, reminding him of his protective power and that God himself is Abraham's reward.

Despite having trusted God over years of meandering through the Middle East, Abraham's pain surfaces when he says: "You have given me no children, so a servant in my household will be my heir. God reiterates a previous promise, that he will have descendants that will be too many to count. And here are two key statements, both in verse 6:

- 1) He believed the Lord
- 2) and the LORD reckoned it to him as righteousness

So some 4,000 years ago the idea of faith enabling us to be put right with God was established. It wasn't because of anything that Abraham had done but rather because Abraham believed in God. And these sentences have echoed down the centuries. The same words are used of the priest Phineas when his life is remembered by the Psalmist a thousand years later (Ps 106 v 31), and a further thousand years on by Paul when he wrote to the Romans, outlining the basic tenets of the Christian faith (Rom 4:3, 20-24). Observing the law on its own isn't enough, he says, stressing that the purpose of knowledge of the law is to help us to see where we are going wrong, but that righteousness comes through faith in Jesus to all who believe.

Earlier this year I explored the difference between believing that someone exists, believing that what they say, and believing in them. The challenge to become a Christian involves all three – believing in an historic Jesus, believing what he said, and then putting our trust in him and choosing to follow him.

Following him involves thinking about every area of our lives. This is an idea picked up by James, one of Jesus's brothers, in his book which comes towards the end of the Bible. He was very direct: *Faith by itself, if it isn't accompanied by action, is dead* (James 2:23). If we have truly understood the life, death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus, then we are motivated to facilitate his kingdom here on earth, right now.

Our faith challenges our whole understanding and world view – and our behaviour. We don't change everything overnight but, by God's grace, we are being transformed day by day so that our character reflects that of Christ.

Our Gospel reading begins with real encouragement: Do not be afraid, little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom.

But it immediately goes on to give us practical suggestions for living – some of which you may well question – like: *Sell your possessions, and give alms* (or give to the poor). The other day I watched an episode of *Cash in the Attic* where people were going through belongings that they were storing but not using. Some of the objects had emotional attachments. But they sorted out a load of stuff and went to an auction to see how much money was raised. Maybe you have things that you haven't used in a long time and probably won't in the future. Perhaps you could sell some of them and give the money away. I know I could!

Then we are encouraged to be alert and ready.

Before I came to the Island I was living in a village of about 500 people. One night I woke up at three fifteen and saw that a light was on. I didn't think I'd left it on and I hadn't knowingly slept walked since I was a teenager. Feeling rather foolish I went downstairs saying in a loud voice "What's going on down there" and discovered a man quickly exiting the front door.

If I'd known he was coming I would have secured the door more firmly. And I would have put my keys in a safer place – I heard a car starting, and discovered it was the thief stealing mine!

Our gospel ends with Jesus saying: *You also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour.* Members of the early church expected that Jesus would return soon. They actively looked out for him. Two thousand years on our expectation has diminished. Every week in the creed we may say: *He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead, and his kingdom will have no end,* but it doesn't feel as though we are like the servants in the Gospel, waiting for the knock of the bridegroom, ready to open the door and let him in.

In a few moments we will be taking bread and wine. Remembering Jesus and his death on the cross for us, but also looking forward to his second coming. In gratitude for receiving the mystery of the elements, we will be offering our souls and bodies to be a living sacrifice. And we will be asking to be sent out in the power of the Holy Spirit to live and work to the praise and glory of God. May this be true for us today.

Amen

Rosemary Clarke

Sermon, Peel Cathedral, Sunday 7<sup>th</sup> August 2022