

Sunday Sermon

Revd Canon Charles Jenkin – 16th August 2020 – 10th Sunday after Trinity

Isaiah 56.1.6-8; Romans 11.1-2a,29-32; Matthew 15.10-28

In a time of great change, what can we hold on to, and what must we let go of? It's a difficult question, and everyone can be wrong footed. The challenge of the Covid-19 pandemic increasingly seems to be exposing inadequate knowledge and deep seated complacency in many levels of government in our country, and indeed across whole populations world-wide.

Everyone is on a sharp learning curve, and at every point as we survey the mistakes being made by people with responsibility, we need to ask ourselves, well if I had been in their position, would I have done any better? Everyone should refrain from rushing to judgment, and instead we should be asking ourselves, how can we help each other get through this?

It has become commonplace for some decades to observe that we live in times of great change, much of it being driven by technology. But the Covid-19 pandemic is a level of change we have not seen since the 2nd World War, and it is not over yet, by a long chalk. The nation has just celebrated the final cataclysmic end to a fight against a brutal fascist enemy 74 years ago, and it took decades to recover from that time of great change. Now as then we all have to make the best of it, and the key question remains, "In a time of great change what can we hold on to, and what must we let go of?"

In our readings today, everyone, except Jesus himself, is grappling with this. Jesus the Jew, thoroughly wrong foots his Jewish disciples, by declaring that the spiritual rules of ritual cleanliness in the Jewish religion, are fundamentally irrelevant. It's not what goes into your mouth that matters, it's what comes out of your heart. Wo! To get an idea of the impact of this on the disciples, try saying that to people who diet a lot, or to a vegan, and there nothing wrong with dieting or veganism. It's not what goes into your mouth that really matters, it's what comes out of it. Rules of ritual cleanliness are widespread in all sorts of human society, and Jesus just.... overturns it all. He leaves his disciples reeling.

What Jesus is saying is, "Get real, focus on what really makes a difference!" The way we treat one another is actually far more important than the self-obsessed ways we often treat ourselves. He is saying that love of others is more important than our own self-image. He is saying that if you think you love God, you need to know that these are God's priorities too. For it is the things that come out of the human heart, that really affect others, not what enters your own mouth.

Then in the second part of our Gospel reading, Jesus is addressing another widespread but false religious assumption. He is contesting the idea that God has favourites, that religion is about being exclusive, and he is doing so in the knowledge that exclusivity is the besetting sin of human religion. Jesus actually plays a game with the Canaanite woman, but it is a game she is in on from the start, and the real learning experience is once again for the disciples. The disciples think that Jesus has come to make their own nation great again, but

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both Jesus and the Canaanite woman know that if Jesus really is the Messiah, this cannot be true.

Jesus' rather offensive comment about throwing children's food to dogs is a parody of ideas of religious exclusivity, and the woman agrees and is ready with an answer that is deeply rooted in the Jewish scriptures. The call, the responsibility, of those chosen by God, is to be a light to others, a light to the nations, and not to bask in their own calling. Jesus therefore commends her faith and heals her daughter. Jesus did not come to make any nation, any one people great again, but to heal the whole world.

Much of the New Testament sets out to underline a sense of continuity between the Jewish religion and the emerging faith of Christianity. This is not surprising since the key area of growth in the early church was around Jewish synagogues. Christianity grew strongly at first among those who were not actually Jews, but who were nevertheless attracted by the Jewish faith in the one true God. They were now fully included, even though they were not Jews themselves. However this outlook of continuity stands in stark contrast to the revolutionary nature of Christian theology. It is a divine revolution which challenges so many of the usual ways of human religion.

Today's Gospel underlines this. Being Christian is not about being loyal to a religious tradition. It is about taking hold of a radical faith, based on the radical love of God revealed in Jesus Christ. It is a faith which changes lives, changes communities and changes worlds. Christians are people who know they are being changed by the love of God, and who are learning to embrace that change, and not to fear it.

As we grapple with the changes that so beset us as a result of Covid-19, it is this Christian faith which should guide us in what we hold onto, and what we let go of. A faith that is not about love of self, but love of others. A faith that is not self-centred, but open and generous. A faith that does not hold on to what is familiar at all costs, but is ready to trust in the faithfulness of God in a changing world. Amen.

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