

Other people make mistakes

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Philippians 3:4-14

Matthew 21:33-46

http://www.stlukesinthecity.org.nz/sermons_pid_22.html



Now that all the political party billboards have disappeared from view, we have a chance to notice some others and I'm quite taken with a billboard that shows a couple of men who've had a near collision in their cars just standing facing each other, deciding what to do next, with the simple caption, "other people make mistakes, slow down".

Other people make mistakes, because of course it's always other people who make mistakes, never us, isn't it?!

I've been thinking about this as I heard our Gospel reading today, one of a series of accounts Matthew gives of rather trenchant encounters Jesus has with the Jewish authorities of his time. I think we need to grasp the context: we're coming to the part of Matthew's gospel which talks of the last week of Jesus' life, so things are hotting up. Jesus has entered Jerusalem riding on a donkey, the crowds are going wild with enthusiasm at the arrival of their favourite prophet, but then Jesus' prophetic ministry takes on a dramatic turn. He enters the Temple and then seems to go berserk, clearing out the moneylenders and the sellers of sacrificial animals. The temple authorities come back at Jesus: By what authority are you doing these things and who gave you this authority? (Mt 21:23).

That exchange between Jesus and the Temple authorities ends up in a verbal tussle, but then Jesus took things onto a different level by offering a series of 3 parables, stories which are open-ended, which offer the opportunity of response or a change of mind.

The first parable is about the 2 sons, one of whom told his father he *wouldn't* work in his vineyard and then *did*, and the other son who said he *would* work in the vineyard and then *didn't*.

Jesus shrewdly contrasts different responses to his ministry but also offers an opening, a way forward to his hearers, a hint that they too have the possibility of changing their minds about him if they so choose.

The 2nd parable Jesus tells is the one we heard in today's Gospel, again about a vineyard. The vineyard was a well-trodden image in the Hebrew scriptures (Isaiah 5) used of God's relationship with his people Israel, it would have been well familiar to Jesus' hearers.

God has entrusted his vineyard, his people, to his tenants, the religious leaders, those charged with the care of his vineyard, but when God sends his slaves to collect the fruit of the vineyard, the tenants kill them. So have God's representatives, the prophets, been treated over the years when people didn't want to hear what they had to say from God. But then a new image – the owner sends his son, 'they will respect my son'. But no, here is a chance to grab the inheritance and they kill him. Jesus then offers his hearers the chance to finish the story, what should happen to the tenants? And they indict themselves, Jesus doesn't even have to finish the story for them.

Jesus then picks up another image from the Scriptures, and there's a bit of a pun here. He talked about the son in the parable, the word for son is '*ben*'; now he talks about a stone, for which the word is '*eben*'. The *ben* has become an *eben*, the *son* is a *stone* that was rejected but then becomes the cornerstone of a new building, a new Temple.

You can see how deeply challenging this was to Jesus' hearers: 'The chief priests and the Pharisees realised that he was speaking about them. They wanted to arrest him but they feared the crowds, because *they* regarded him as a prophet' (Mt 21:45-46).

As I reflect on how Jesus faced this situation of conflict, he was not afraid to challenge his hearers, but he also gave them the opportunity to think more deeply. He told them stories, parables, he used images they were familiar with from the Scriptures and called them to think again, to see things differently, and left them with a choice. And all the while Jesus was willing to count the cost to himself, he must have been weighing up and facing in himself the suffering he was increasingly likely to experience from those who opposed him. Remember it was he who spoke of the death of the son in the parable.

This got me thinking about how we face opposition, disagreement, conflict in our world, whether our personal world or the wider world around us which seems so full of conflict between nations and religions at this time.

We have just celebrated the feast day of St Francis, and we know of an encounter between Francis and the Sultan of Egypt at the time of the 5th Crusade in 1219. Francis was not supportive of the Crusade and failing to convince the Cardinal leading the Crusade to stop it, he travelled to Egypt himself to meet the Sultan, saying that if he were killed, death would only bring him into the presence of his Lord.

Francis was able to meet the Sultan, and tell him about Jesus who loved him and suffered for him. The Sultan was impressed by what he said about Jesus, but said his experience of Christians was not so positive. When he offered Francis gold to take away with him, Francis refused and the Sultan said he was the first Christian he'd met who wasn't interested in money! The Sultan did give him a sickle-shaped sword which can still be seen in Assisi. The Crusaders were in due course defeated, but the Sultan let them go home free for the sake of Francis of Assisi.

Now we know the Crusades have had a negative impact on relations between Muslims and Christians to this day, but what does the example of St Francis of Assisi in his conversation with the Sultan teach us?

One figure who plays that St Francis role currently in the Middle East, I think, is Canon Andrew White, who was once the Anglican Vicar of St George's Baghdad, but now is based in Jerusalem and Jordan, and involved in ongoing conversations and relationships with Jewish and Muslim leaders, both Sunni and Shi'ite, in the Middle East. He and his wife Caroline both face significant health challenges, both living with multiple sclerosis, and he has faced funding crises in recent times because of his use of funds to free women caught up in human trafficking and to support refugee families in Jordan. But there is no doubt that out of his own human weakness, God has used him to build bridges of relationship and hope.

The challenge perhaps for us all is how we relate to those with whom we may disagree or have historical conflict, how we now build relationship, how we keep talking and listening, look for the good in their life and religion, look for things we can affirm, and remember 'other people make mistakes, slow down'!

The Archbishop of Canterbury, Justin Welby, spoke about this in a sermon in Ireland: 'The great gift of Anglicanism at its best is to be a reconciling church, reconciled reconcilers. Reconciled with God and from the overflow of that reconciling the world around...The effort of reconciliation is fuelled by the Spirit for the long journey of transformed

hearts. We stand firm most effectively when we stand for the positive hope of reconciliation, the gift of God, through his church, to a world incompetent in the face of diversity'¹.

The long journey of transformed hearts. That is what St Paul bears witness to in his testimony to the Philippians. For what is often most powerful in speaking with those with whom we have differences (and Paul speaks of such opposition in the verses just before our reading), what is most powerful is just humbly telling our own story, our own experience, and letting it stand in the space between us.

Just so, Paul tells his story, not this time an account of his conversion, but rather the result: all that before he counted as gain in his life now was loss – “my richest gain I count but loss, and pour contempt on all my pride”² Why? Because he has gained Christ, and the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord and being found in him (Phil 3:8-9) Now Paul is very clear about his focus: I want to know Christ, and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death, if somehow I may attain the resurrection from the dead (Phil 3:10-11).

Now ‘to know Christ and the power of his resurrection’ is fine, but how on earth can Paul want to share in Christ’s sufferings? It is because to know Christ as risen and alive *is* to have power to suffer like him and for him, and to possess the sure hope of rising and living with him. This is the Christian hope that sustained St Francis of Assisi and gave him the courage to seek dialogue with the Sultan of Egypt; this is what sustains Canon Andrew White in his current day dialogue with Jewish and Muslim leaders in the Middle East; this is the Christian hope which sustains Christians suffering for their faith throughout the world today. May this Christian hope sustain us as we live with diversity in our world and in our church today, and seek to be reconcilers. Amen.

¹ www.archbishopofcanterbury.org/articles.php/5422/archbishop-justins-sermon-at-armagh-cathedral 2 October 2014

² ‘When I survey the wondrous cross’, Isaac Watts