

“By what authority?” a sermon based on Matthew 21:23-32 preached by Kerry Enright at Knox Church Dunedin New Zealand on Sunday 28 September 2014

What was it about tax collectors and prostitutes? Why will they make it into the kingdom of God ahead of chief priests and elders?

In a culture of honour and shame, they were not honoured; they were shamed. They did not imagine they had what was needed to get into the kingdom of God. Honour, status, authority – they did not live in that world.

When a person treated them honourably, they noticed. When a person respected them, they sensed it. When they experienced grace, they felt it. They did not expect society owed them. They were attuned to grace.

Tony Campolo tells of arriving in a new town after an overnight trip and looking for a meal. It was 2.30 a.m. and the only place open was a classic US diner, and not the cleanest. But he sat down and ordered a coffee and a donut. At 3 a.m. a whole lot of women came into the diner, and he realised the women worked in prostitution. The air was rich, and there was a lot of cheeky banter of a robust kind. And he happened to hear that Agnes, one of the women, was having a birthday the next day. So he said to the guy behind the counter, does this happen every night, do these women come every night. Yep, so with owner of the diner, he organised to throw a party for Agnes the following night. He arrived at 2.15 with streamers. He had painted a sign of birthday greetings. And the owner of the diner provided a cake. The guests were schooled. So when Agnes came through the doors at 3 a.m. she was greeted with the group singing happy birthday, of streamers and the sign of greeting. She was disarmed, shaken; she buckled. Then the owner brought out the cake, and she was so overcome the owner had to blow out the candles for her. She asked to take the cake to show it at home and so she left, just a few houses down the street, carrying it as if it was the most precious thing in the world, and she showed the people in her house, and then she returned for the party.

Agnes was attuned to grace, to people engaging her as a person, not a stereotype.

Who knows about the chief priests and elders? They were decent, good, Godly people. They did what they had learned to do, and it was something learned over generations. They knew the way people experienced God. They sensed the difference between truth and error. They had seen things go terribly awry over hundreds of years and they had learned how to safeguard faith. They sensed that if you did this, and then this, and then this, there was a greater chance of being faithful to God, of knowing God. Surely their question to Jesus was entirely fair. “By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority?” Doubtful preachers had won credulous people before. They knew the risk. They were protecting the people.

Recently a friend of mine attended a civic service, offered in the classic style. He told me that through the service, through the readings and the sermon and the prayers, some people around him just kept talking, quietly, discretely, but this was their opportunity to catch up and they took it. The people were disengaged, uninterested, uninvolved – nothing of any significance was happening to them, but they wanted to support their organisation.

Who can blame them? There is little in our society that suggests respect for what is done here. There is nothing inherently authoritative about the Church or about a church service - the Bible, the preaching, the praying, the music, the building – they have their place alongside every other institution in the city. There is nothing of a human nature that suggests people should pay special attention to what happens here.

We might argue we propound values society needs – but there are other ways to do that. We might argue there is a tradition that needs to be maintained, of spirituality, of the heights and depths of human experience – but there are other ways to do that. We might argue there is a wellspring here, of history and experience and wisdom from which we can draw truth for today – but there are other places that can give that. We might argue that week by week we hear music of a superb standard, an experience of rhythm and movement, helping us attend to what is beautiful and good in life – but there are other places that produce that. We might argue that we are about helping people be good – in societal terms – cherishing creation and each other – not to be sneezed at, but there are other ways of doing that. We might argue that this city was established by Free Church people and there is a need to show some respect to the wisdom of our forbears –but that sounds hollow. We might argue, as I do, that you need a community to change the world, and we are here to change the world, and we cannot do it alone - so join Oxfam. All of these things are societal goods, in a way, but really, they sound inadequate, at least for me; not enough to get out of bed on Sunday morning, not enough to give my whole of life to, not enough to tell my friends about, not enough to die for.

In the framework our society brings to these matters, I do not believe there is a compelling reason for Church – there is no compelling argument for Knox – try as hard as we can, be as smart as we can, we simply cannot fit Knox into the framework our society offers us – beauty, goodness, political change, wisdom, tradition – it’s like squeezing the tent back into its bag once you have used it. There is no real need for us in society’s framework.

Indeed, as society continually reminds us, there is every reason for us not to be. We have fostered credulity so people fall for the most ridiculous half-truths. We have either watered down faith so it is mind-numbingly bland or so expanded faith that it is mind-numbingly silly. We have divided people between faiths and tilled the soil from which fundamentalism has grown.

Secularism, in some ways, is a great gift to us. The flow between culture and Church evident in the fifties and sixties has evaporated. The props are knocked away. The status we had has gone. The arguments we used are not seen to be compelling. Our society is making us more like tax collectors and prostitutes than we have been for a long time. Thank God!

Here we are, then, at the edge, at the margins, stereotyped. We have no authority. We have no honour - at least no authority or honour as society gives.

What are we left with? What do we have?

This is going to sound trite in the extreme – we are left with Jesus of Nazareth. We are left with his startling newness, that does not fit the society in which we live, that is so radically different we talk of a different country, a different realm, a different way of being, a different being. And at the core of the good news of Jesus Christ is that God, the ground of our being, the utterly other, the one beside, among, beyond us, loves each person with the deepest and most wondrous love, and wants

them to be part of the movement that will change the world so everyone comes to know that, to live that.

Duncan Jamieson used to say that the gospel is – “God loves ratbags.” And if you wanted an expanded version – “God loves ratbags like me.”

This is a word for prostitutes and tax collectors, and I pray, I pray, I will be among them, attuned to grace, not relying on my standing, my goodness, my respectability, my place in society, my belonging to Knox Church, nor even my faith, but only, only, on God’s grace, God’s ever-giving love, being continually caught up in what God is doing in the world, attentive not to what society presents me with, but with what God is doing in the world, with how God is changing our world.

That dinner is a foretaste.

Introduction

Nothing qualifies us to come into the presence of God – not goodness, not reputation, not regularity, not membership, not longevity or youthfulness. We can come only because of the grace of God in Jesus Christ – ever before we turn, God turns to us; ever before we imagine God, God imagines us. So we come.

Prayer of Praise and Confession

Sheer grace - unearned, unsought love, pure love, your love, overflowing, ever-present, limitless, unfathomable, inexhaustible, here, now, encompassing us, including us, welcoming us, great God of love, we praise you.

Earthed grace, not far above us, not long ago, not beyond our knowing, fully present, whatever our life, whoever we are, embedded in our living, ever near, great God of love, we praise you.

Free grace, ever moving, ever stretching, weaving through creation with ever greater power, changing our world until it becomes the realm of Jesus Christ, love incarnate, great God of love, we praise you.

We confess our inclination to manage you, to rule you, to pocket you, making you fit our pre-conceptions, letting culture capture you, letting society corral you, letting others name you, humbling you by pressing you into our service. Forgive us.

We confess the limits of our imagination, the shallowness of our experience, the fickleness of our devotion, that makes you convenient, pleasant, nice, uninvolved, so we can get on, unchallenged, undisturbed, unchanged. Forgive us.

Dare we ask you, to come among us with fresh power, with new spirit, with startling love, until you win us again, and again and again, so we can love you with all that we are, through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

Assurance of Pardon

We are invited to experience again, total love, unmitigated grace, absolute forgiveness for all we have done. Please do not present goodness. Please do not bring respectability. Please do not imagine niceness will do it. Only the love of God in Christ Jesus redeems. In the name of Christ, I declare to you, you are forgiven.

Charge

Beloved, let this mind be in you that was also in Christ Jesus – love God and serve others, in the name of Christ. Amen.

Blessing

The blessing of God be with you, the love of Jesus fill you, and the power of the Holy Spirit sustain you, now and forevermore. Amen.