

## Luke 17:5-10 Manuka, Diocese of Canberra and Goulburn

Today's Gospel is part of the instruction Jesus gave to his disciples as they journeyed towards Jerusalem.

He's inviting them to choose to live *now already* in the Kingdom of God. Deliberately and sacrificially to place themselves within the company God's beloved daughters and sons.

As he shows in his *own* life, it's a demanding call but, *once perceived*, the only one worthwhile. It's worth selling all to buy the pearl of great price.

Jesus is asking "will you come and follow me on the costly road that You see me choosing to tread?" .....persistently turning away from self-interest, allowing yourselves to be drawn outward and towards others and towards God – who is constantly on the road, watchful to welcome us.

About this journey, Jesus gives tireless and urgent warnings. Warnings which were crucial for the churches of Luke's own day and just as pertinent for us, in our persistence as Church now.

Jesus warns against the arrogance of *entitlement*. Our small selves can be so convinced that the world exists entirely for our benefit that we cause others to stumble. So we damage and degrade the lives of our sisters and brothers, forgetting that, *in God's embrace*, each one of us is equal.

The good news is that God loves me unconditionally.  
What I have to get used to is that God loves you just as much.

Jesus also warns against the temptation to withhold our forgiveness. He's not asking us to be doormats for others – Jesus himself was no victim; the God of Jesus passionately desires the fulfilment of all. Jesus with his disciples *challenged* as much as he *healed and forgave*.

Perhaps we could say that forgiveness has two hands. *With one hand* we forgive, because we can do no other.

We are commanded to forgive by our Lord...seven times a day, in other words, without end.

But Luke also reminds us of a *second hand of forgiveness*. Through the repentance of the other we can negotiate that we will not allow ourselves or others to be sinned against again in this way. God's desire is for a world of *Beatitude for all*. For humanity fully alive. Our calling is always towards being a community of wisdom, agents of a world of mature human relating.

Jesus also warns against nostalgia and dependency. . . .Our tendency to rely on past achievements or the faith of others. For his first disciples, this was to bask in the memory of the faith of Abraham. Luke is saying to churches in every generation, "You may be very proud of your past achievements and the glory days of your community, but what is the Holy Spirit saying to you *today*? What does the world *now* require of you?" In *this* moment and place, *what* is our *urgent* response to God?

Seizing on the disciples' request that he would "increase their faith", he challenges them to *take responsibility* for their own spiritual growth. He's shown them often enough how it goes. So he challenges, "do it, be it, step into it, make it your own! Recognise *your* share in God's abundance!" As we hear in the Beatitudes, "go and be a blessing to the world, in its most needy places and you will know yourself to be blessed". As we might say now, "Stop *coming to church* – and *become church*, church" - as an active verb more than as a noun.

To enter into the abundance, joy, praise, blessing of the God of Jesus is *both* passive and active. Passive in the sense that an apple cannot ripen itself, even through anxiously straining its every atom. Apples ripen through exposure to sunlight.

But for followers of Jesus there also has to be readiness, *presence*, desire, a willingness to confront our poverty and helplessness, faith no bigger than a mustard seed.

*Then as God's beloved*, we can let ourselves be transformed into Godself and recognise how our lives are *already* hidden with Christ in God.

Continuing, Jesus says - the *only* way to know and serve God with authenticity is in taking the attitude of a *slave*. A slave owes everything to the master. So disciples of Jesus can do nothing to earn God's love. They have no credit to cash in for favours.

My recent work with local churches in the UK and just recently here in Australia, has explored the comprehensive scriptural themes of *joy, praise, blessing, abundance and thanksgiving*....as an antidote to persistent anxiety and a sense of deficit among church communities.

If we take *blessing in order to be a blessing* as a central axis of Jesus' Gospel we can be assured that

God doesn't love us *because* or *when* we're "good".

God loves us *simply because God is "good" ....to encourage us to become who we are called to be....personally and together as Church.*

Though to accept God's blessing is no light matter. Its brings the challenge of following *in his way, a way that is alien to our modern way of self-understanding*. It's important to hold this in mind when churches fret about the decline, problems and all kinds of "not having enough" and reach instead for simplistic programmes to resolve them.

This is a transitional and turbulent time for faith and for churches. Many received ways of being Church are no longer fit for purpose. But there are real dangers in adopting panic measures.

My work is to encourage us all to be part of reframing the culture, identity and confidence of churches – as institutions, organisations and local communities.

The renewing of church is, *at the same time*, both extremely simple – even if difficult – and yet complex and never completed. It requires a conversational dialogue with many disciplines.

Sitting under texts of Scripture, how could we ever have mistaken Christian faith for a pleasant, respectable, normative approach to living together in society and the world?

Jesus, born in obscurity, dying brutally, as a criminal, never spoke except of the way of *descending*. To be *followers, disciples* of Jesus, God's beloved daughters and sons, is to be given a vocation and that vocation is always forged with the sign of the cross, the dominant symbol that faces us in church imagery, but so often faded from our awareness. It's not easy to feel and understand *from the inside* this *descending way* of Jesus. It's unnatural in a world committed to rising up to success at whatever cost to others. Every fibre of our being rebels against it.

We don't mind, from time to time, paying attention to those we label as "poor". But to descend *ourselves* to a state of poverty, recognising ourselves *as poor* and *becoming poor with the poor...* that we don't want to do. Yet that is the *only* way of the God Jesus shows as trustworthy: the *descending* way of mutual relatedness.

The trinitarian way Christians have come to express in belief, song and mutual love

The Trinitarian concept of God is such a rich resource to help us to live in a new reality based on reciprocal and self-giving connection instead of adversarial, isolating or alienating relations.

To name God as Trinity proclaims, "In the beginning is Relationship" –not a mathematical problem but our most precious gift.

"In every leap of life, every turn towards the future, every creative moment, every loving surge, every dash towards beauty, every run towards truth, is the eternal flowing life of the Trinitarian God.

[Richard Rohr and Mike Morrell, *The Divine Dance*, 2016]

The Blessing of this God is not an occasional additive to our world that we occasionally merit, but a demonstration of and invitation towards, the tenderness and interconnectedness inherent in all God's creation. Our choice today as members of the Body, as Church is whether to come to God on a stretcher or dressed for dancing. Amen

The Rev'd Canon Dr Robin Greenwood