

Devotional Blog

Sunday 27th September

Do you remember that old adage from your school history lessons-
“All power corrupts, and absolute power corrupts absolutely”?

Lord Acton’s famous quote is just as true today as it was in history.

In addition to the danger of falling into corruption institutional leaders, despite all their power, are surprisingly susceptible to fear. We are told the Kim Jong Un has had several of his relatives killed because of his fear of a coup against him. Donald Trump throughout his years of office is said to be fearful of his ratings dropping.

It was like this in Jesus’ day. Matthew’s Gospel (21:23-32) tells us of the challenge the political powers of the day made to Jesus. The Chief Priests and Elders were a formidable body, so why do they challenge Jesus? Well, his triumphal entrance into Jerusalem created a real stir and he had followed this up by cleansing the Temple of salesmen and money dealers.

When Jesus returns to the Temple the next day, they are waiting for him. Their demand is the equivalent of “and who do you think you are?” Of course, they didn’t want an answer. They wanted to catch him out, but Jesus knows their game. He silences them by asking where John the Baptist got his authority. Their fear of the crowd restrains the powerful leader’s ability to answer.

Jesus follows up with some parables that clearly expose the leaders. The first is a noticeably short parable only found in Matthew’s Gospel. It feels like the cousin of the famous parable of the Prodigal Son.

Two sons are asked by their Father to work in the vineyard. One says “yes” but does not do the work, the other tells his Father “no” but

changes his mind and goes to work. In a middle eastern culture of shame and honour implies that the son who said yes to his Father face is the more respectful. However, Jesus wants to highlight the son we did the will of the Father. Righteous deeds are more important than righteous words.

This isn't a question of faith versus action. Matthew's Gospel is clear, if you believe in Jesus, you do the peace-making, the mercy granting, the justice seeking of the Sermon on the Mount.

This short parable teaches us that promises can never take place of performance. Fine words are never a substitute for fine deeds. Not for the first time we find that parables have teeth, and at times they bite!

But we can't stop there. We need to ask what this parable means for us and our church today. Is our church doing the peace-making, the mercy granting and the justice seeking work of the Kingdom of Heaven or is it just getting the words right?

The exciting and perhaps disturbing thing about Worship and prayer is the looming possibility that we might hear an invitation to change. The sound of the call to work in the vineyard rings out afresh from the Lord. Is there a task at church that needs doing, that we have said "no" to? Is there someone who we have fallen out with and we don't want to make up with? Do we have negative views on certain groups of people, the sort that the media like to demonise? Are we being called to change our minds like one of those sons?

Jesus wants you in the vineyard. He wants to have a loving relationship with you. He wants your peace-making, your mercy granting, your justice seeking; and Brothers and Sisters he wants you to lead others into the Kingdom of Heaven.

Mark Gilks

Hampton Mission Partnership