

*Sunday 06 June 2010 10.30 a.m.*

*Discipleship 2010: BUILDING, OUTREACH, BELONGING.*

**Building with Promise: Walking the Talk, Speaker: RFS.**

**REFERENCES:**

**Matthew 21 v 28-32**

**Luke 6 v 46-49**

We continue our 2010 theme of Building, Outreach, Belonging, and look at the challenge of building an effective and dynamic church community: today's keynote words come from Matthew's Gospel, chapter 21 and verses 28-31, and the storyteller is Jesus himself:

*<sup>28</sup>"What do you think? There was a man who had two sons. He went to the first and said, 'Son, go and work today in the vineyard.'*

*<sup>29</sup>" 'I will not,' he answered, but later he changed his mind and went.*

*<sup>30</sup>"Then the father went to the other son and said the same thing. He answered, 'I will, sir,' but he did not go.*

*<sup>31</sup>"Which of the two did what his father wanted?"*

*"The first," they answered.*

*Jesus said to them, "I tell you the truth, the tax collectors and the prostitutes are entering the kingdom of God ahead of you. <sup>32</sup>For John came to you to show you the way of righteousness, and you did not believe him, but the tax collectors and the prostitutes did. And even after you saw this, you did not repent and believe him.*

Once upon a time, there was a nation that promised to be the covenant people of God... And they did, for a while, keep their promise, but time took its toll, and they began to look at other people. They began to compare notes with the nations around them who had kings. And so, they entered into wars, they were defeated, exiled, repented, restored, rebelled, refused to listen, and – eventually – they were occupied by an enemy Power – the Romans.

Broken promises! A broken relationship with their covenant God. And STILL they persisted, and went their own way. So God tried again:

The Son of God, the promised Messiah begins his ministry, and tells the leaders of the Temple, that the ordinary people that they often criticise are going to enter the kingdom of God, before they do! And he does it – frequently - through stories. This is the story of the two sons in the vineyard.

The religious leaders came to Jesus and asked him what kind of authority he had received, that enabled him to act as a teacher and a healer. They had seen him ride into Jerusalem to a hero's welcome. They had heard how he spoke

two words and withered a fig tree that did not produce its fruit in season, when he found it on the roadside on the way from Bethany back into Jerusalem (another promise that had been broken, rather like the nation!) and they had heard him teaching the crowds in the Temple courts, and being a rabbi – a teacher – also giving advice to those who came to ask for it. He was popular and he was powerful.

Maybe they felt threatened? Maybe they wanted to find out who had sent him – what was his agenda? Or maybe – they just wanted a piece of the action? It must have been quite difficult for these men to accept that people who came off the fishing boats and out of the fields – ordinary, uneducated people were teaching in the Temple courts, and were in touch with the power of God: so Jesus – always ready to use every opportunity – told them a story: "*A man had two sons...*"

An older and a younger son: an older son, who would inherit the bulk of the farm, and a younger son – who would have a smaller share. Sometimes Jesus was asked to solve family problems involving inheritances between two sons. Maybe he even had a particular family in mind, when he gave them this illustration. It was, after all, a very *local* kind of situation. Father gives out the work – one wants to know, the other doesn't – BUT actually, in the beginning, neither of them really wants to know. And then one of them changes his mind...

Although this story comes to us from one of the three Synoptic gospels – which describe the ministry of Jesus using most of the same events and teaching points – only Matthew runs this particular story, about the two sons. Matthew's gospel is thought to have been written relatively early – some think as early as AD50, some argue for AD65-80. It is strongly Jewish in character, however, the gospel text we are looking at was originally written in Greek, and it is organised in 'teaching themes', rather than a strict chronological order:

One of the hallmarks of Matthew's gospel is the way that his material is organised. He presents Jesus as the Teacher – qualified to teach the law of God with an authentic voice. Often, Jesus' comments on how to live are contrasted with the traditions of the Elders and the Pharisees: where Jesus speaks the emphasis is on the heart – the centre of our actions – "*what comes out of a man*", and this tale is no exception. The discipline of doing the right thing is important – but the heart that generates genuine obedience is far more important. This is why you will find Jesus condemning the hypocrisy he found in the leaders of his day. It is not enough to be a "box-ticker" (and never will be). You know – this encourages me again, when I read it – I meet a lot of people who have little time for formal "religion", but plenty of time for authentic spirituality: Jesus speaks straight to this approach.

However – I believe there is more to this short parable than simply putting up a challenge to the status quo. Matthew recorded this story with others, to show how the early followers of Jesus were being taught to build the community of

disciples in the first century, and the story shows the difference between the old tradition, which focussed on the rules – and the new faith, where it was still important to *know* the truth, but much more important to *live* it.

*Read: (now or later)*

- *"by their fruit you will recognise them" Matt 7 v 15-20*
- *house on the rock Matt 7 v 24-27*
- *sons in the vineyard Matt 21 v 28-31*

Jesus didn't allow himself to be dismissed as just a "good teacher". In fact, when people attempted to "box him in" to that role he was quite challenging with them: *Why do you call me "good"?* He retorted: *"No-one is good, except God alone". (Matt 19 v17-19)* Neither did Jesus set out to oppose the teaching people already had. He began in each case by directing his questioners back to the laws and traditions of God, which they had already learned. But when he did so, he also challenged people's understanding, and ultimately their lifestyle. And in the process, he challenged their hearts. *"It is what comes out of a man that defiles him."*

Jesus was and is the ultimate "Knower" of the human heart – and demonstrated that he did not judge people when he came the first time: but He had no illusions about human nature. He does not fail to challenge self-interest, greed, pride, fear, or hypocrisy when he finds it.

It's worth asking ourselves: what happens when I am asked about my faith? If we are living lives that reflect kingdom values, questions will come from those who are around us – without a doubt. We may be asked about a value we hold, or about something we do, that grows out of our faith and convictions. Or simply about what we do with our weekends. What are we going to say? What are you going to say? What will I say?

Are we going to stop at "quoting the rules", or even at defending ourselves? Or will we have the courage – and the heart for others - that leads us to gently challenge the heart? To nudge the conscience? To uncover the questions in someone's mind? - But without sitting in judgement. Jesus did. Are we learning to follow in his steps?

<sup>16</sup>*Now a man came up to Jesus and asked, "Teacher, what good thing must I do to get eternal life?"*

<sup>17</sup>*"Why do you ask me about what is good?" Jesus replied. "There is only One who is good. If you want to enter life, obey the commandments."*

<sup>18</sup>*"Which ones?" the man inquired.*

*Jesus replied, " 'Do not murder, do not commit adultery, do not steal, do not give false testimony, <sup>19</sup>honor your father and mother, <sup>[d]</sup> and 'love your neighbor as yourself. <sup>[e]</sup>"*

Here is another example of Jesus in dialogue with someone who was beginning to wake up to the uncomfortable fact that there is more to life than being a “good person” – doing what a good community member does, following the guidelines. Did you notice – the laws he chose to quote all related to treatment of others?

When Jesus prepared to leave his disciples at the end of his time on earth – after his death and resurrection, and before his ascension – he left them with a mandate: *“ All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore, go and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you” (Matthew 28 v 20)*

You see – he expected his followers to *do* something! He does call his disciples to baptise – indeed – but they are called to baptise people into a whole way of life. Jesus expects his disciples to make disciples, and to teach everything he commanded – including the need to go and make (more) disciples! And then to teach them, too. What am I saying? Am I saying that becoming a Christian is not enough? Well –no – and yes! Because baptism in the time of the New Testament was about identifying with a Teacher, and sharing his way of life – so eventually it meant not only leading others to Christ, but also teaching them to do the same, and so on. At one end of the chain Peter and the rest: at the other end of the chain: you and me!

That is why it was possible for people like Peter – who had not had a lot of formal education – to become a teacher and a leader in the early church. And it was one of the reasons too, that the church was able to grow so quickly! Everyone was a disciple! Everyone was learning – and everyone was sharing and teaching what they learned, leaders and non-leaders alike!

Turn with me please to *Acts, chapter 5 verses 1-6:*

*<sup>1</sup>Now a man named Ananias, together with his wife Sapphira, also sold a piece of property. <sup>2</sup>With his wife's full knowledge he kept back part of the money for himself, but brought the rest and put it at the apostles' feet.*

*<sup>3</sup>Then Peter said, "Ananias, how is it that Satan has so filled your heart that you have lied to the Holy Spirit and have kept for yourself some of the money you received for the land? <sup>4</sup>Didn't it belong to you before it was sold? And after it was sold, wasn't the money at your disposal? What made you think of doing such a thing? You have not lied to men but to God."*

*<sup>5</sup>When Ananias heard this, he fell down and died. And great fear seized all who heard what had happened. <sup>6</sup>Then the young men came forward, wrapped up his body, and carried him out and buried him.*

This time we are dealing again with the issue of speaking the truth, but not so much in terms of saying what we mean, but in terms of “telling it like it is”. Peter makes it very clear – there was no obligation on Ananias to sell his land,

and there was nothing that said he had to give all the money he raised to the church. The problem was, Ananias wanted to have his cake and eat it! He wanted to sell the land, keep part of the money, and cash in on the approval of church for giving *all* of the proceeds. He wanted to give a little – and gain a lot! It's the *motive*, the "heart" - that is important here.

### Why did Peter react so strongly?

1. Honesty. Sometimes it's difficult to say "no", isn't it? We want to be liked, respected, admired, so we allow ourselves to be pushed - or we even push ourselves - into saying yes to things that we don't have the resources to deliver. I know that I have to watch out for that! "Yes - I can help" (But no, I can't give more than three evenings a months to this) "Yes, I can give x amount" (but it may not be as much as some others). Some of us don't like to say no, and we don't like to admit our limitations. Particularly we don't like to appear less supportive than others!

But Peter knew - to do this means to be a slave - a slave to other people's opinion. A slave to our own expectations . A slave eventually to our own pride.

2. Wholeheartedness. Look at the first brother in the parable that Jesus told: "No!" he said, I won't do that! But then he went and did it anyway. The point is, it wasn't the easiest thing in the world for that young man to go to the vineyard that day so he said no. But then he went anyway. Because he found he could fit it in after all, perhaps? Or simply - he realised that this was the opportunity to do something for his father whom he loved: he found himself not wanting to it turn down! Jesus - and Peter - were passionate about acting from the inside out - with integrity! With heart.

3. Witness. Jesus knew - and Peter knew - that for every Christian running in the discipleship race, there is an Olympic Stadium of onlookers: angels, saints, brothers and sisters, seekers, critics, and outsiders looking in. And hypocrisy leaves a very nasty taste in the mouth. This is the point that comes up time and again. Some say, " I have no time for God because I have seen too much hypocrisy in the Church". Let's try not to shoot ourselves in the foot!

4. Unity. "Those who pray together... eat together, play together, and work together stay together. One reason that the church grew so fast in the first century was that they spent time together! It was closely connected with the love between the Christians! " *By this shall all men KNOW that you are my disciples: if you have LOVE , one for another.* " So what Ananias decided in the private sphere of his home, and what the brothers decided to do in the private spheres of their hearts, had a profound influence in the public sphere of their lives: and not only their own lives, but also in the circle of influence they exerted on those around them - and on the church community as a whole

Let's take this to heart to day and bring this too to our God, who knows us so well – with all that we are, and all the challenges we face. Let's resolve to be "inside out" people who live from the heart. ! People whose hearts are changed because we have dealt with our hearts! People whose private world is patterned by our love for God! People whose public world sees us acting from the heart – trustworthy, genuine, disciple-making followers of our Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ! People who love each other. Disciples of Christ!

Amen

**\*\* PRAY \*\***