

“Sex workers and tax collectors are going into the Kingdom of God ahead of all you religious people”, Jesus said to the chief priests and elders. You can almost hear the sharp intake of breath, the indignant splutters, the “how dare he” and the sense of utter outrage. “That man, the one who eats with that low life, now he says those sinners are going ahead of us devout Jews”. Could Jesus really say anything more provocative? Tax collectors were generally violent, dishonest Roman collaborators and prostitutes, well they worst type of defiled sinners imaginable; could they really get into the Kingdom of God at all, let alone ahead of the respectable religious leaders? What on earth could Jesus mean? Weren’t religious people meant to be right at the front of the queue into God’s Kingdom? Didn’t they deserve to be first?

I remember once attending a Christian discussion group and the leader read out the story of the prodigal son. He then asked us which character we most identified with. I was rather shocked by the response. One or two people said they identified with the delighted father, re-united with his long lost child, but most of the others felt closely aligned with the older brother. They said they had been Christians all their lives, had always tried to do the right thing, had never broken the law; they could feel the older brother’s anger and resentment. The older brother had worked so hard and been so good; it was just not fair!

I thought to myself, well at least they are being honest, but don’t they *need* any forgiveness? What makes them so sure that they, like the older brother, have earned something? Do they think they should be at the front of the queue into God’s Kingdom? That’s the trouble with queues – where do we think we stand; near the front, in the middle or out the back? The very act of thinking about this causes us to judge others and compare them to ourselves – always a dangerous tactic. But as Jesus says, it does not matter where you *think* you are – God alone knows where you belong; God knows what is in your heart.

When tax collectors and prostitutes went out into the desert to hear John the Baptist, they responded to his words, they repented, they had a radical change of heart, they believed. Jesus accuses the priests and elders of not believing, they saw with their own eyes, heard with their own ears, but they did not accept John’s authority – they knew better, they did not need forgiveness, they knew all about salvation and they were already *certain* of God’s plan for them.

This reminds me of some Christians who are certain that they are “saved”. They usually seem very certain about who is *not* saved too; they sometimes ask me if I’m saved and I usually say I don’t know, I hope so, but it is up to God. There is one thing I am absolutely certain about – God grace cannot be contained or limited. His mind is greater than our minds, His compassionate heart is bigger than ours and the full extent of His loving mercy cannot be squashed into human sized limitations. We need a sense of not knowing, a sense of mystery. We need an acceptance that we will never know the boundaries of God’s forgiveness, the breadth, the depth, the sheer expanse of His love. It goes far beyond our human shaped minds and emotions. Who are we to say God will forgive him but not her, will welcome her into the heavenly banquet but not him? It is not for us to say.

In our reading, Jesus tells the story of two sons. A man tells his two sons and to go to work in the vineyard. God tells us as Christians to go to work, to work for God’s kingdom on earth. Not just to say fine words, make kind gestures and obey rules, but

to roll up our sleeves and get stuck in; to work with, for and alongside others; to co-operate with God's purpose. We are called to *work*, not to simply listen. We are called to change our lives, not just think about it.

How do we respond to God's call? Do we say like son number one, I will not, then have a change of heart and quietly set to work without a fuss? Or do we say yes Lord and then do not bother, slip away, hope God does not notice? In other words, do we just look and sound all religious, make the right compliant noises, but are hollow, rebellious or apathetic inside.

In Matthew chapter 7 Jesus says, "not everyone who says to me Lord, Lord, will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who *does* the will of my Father in heaven". That's clear enough isn't it? Jesus also says, "everyone who hears these words of mine and *acts* upon them will be like a wise man who built his home on rock. Everyone who hears these words of mine and *does not act* on them will be like the foolish man who built his house on sand". That seems straightforward too. The vital parts are *hear* and *act* upon Christ's words. But it is the acting bit that can cause us trouble. How do we know what to do? How can we discern God's call? What is his will for us?

When I first crossed the threshold of this church almost seven years ago, I wanted to be invisible. I thought, I have led such a terrible, sinful life and ignored God for so very long, if the people here know all about me, I'll not be welcome. So I thought I'll keep a low profile and learn a bit about God, a few hymns. So how did I get from creeping in that door to up here? I listened to God's call. It was most definitely not one I wanted to hear, but I could not slip away quietly. I was one of those who said "I will not" to God for many many years, all of my life in fact, but through grace and God's abundant forgiveness, I finally I stepped into the vineyard.

Everyone has work to do in the vineyard; we all have gifts that God can use to build up the Kingdom. We even have gifts that we do not know about - God will reveal them if we just trust Him. We might think we are called to something and then say to ourselves but I can't - I am not good enough, I might fail, I might look silly, I'm too busy, someone else can do that much better than me. I know these feelings very well, they are very human. But God equips us; the Holy Spirit enables us; we just have to trust God's call. He wants to transform us, but we need to put in the leg work - whether its one of the many vital roles that keeps this church going or maybe it is training to be a reader or SPA or maybe it is cooking supper for the homeless on a freezing night. There is something that Christ calls *each and everyone* of us to do - take a risk - reach out a hand to those who are suffering, the frightened, the hurting, the angry and especially those who do not think they deserve our care; those who think they are beyond God's forgiveness; those people who think they are stuck right at the end of that queue. We need to work for God's kingdom. In the words of St Theresa of Avila:

Christ has no body now, but yours.
No hands, no feet on earth, but yours.
Yours are the eyes through which
Christ looks compassion into the world.
Yours are the feet
with which Christ walks to do good.
Yours are the hands
with which Christ blesses the world."
Amen

