

It is always nice to be thanked, except when you are not the right recipient. I had one of those terribly difficult conversations with someone who was thanking me profusely for the note I had sent, how much it meant, how few people had written – the only problem was I hadn't sent it. I felt a complete heel. Not only had I failed to send a note when I obviously should have done, but I had now put her into an embarrassing position. Thank goodness for humour which can defuse such situations.

It was the same feeling I get sometimes at evensong when we have psalm 24 or one of the similar ones – who can ascend the hill of the Lord; answer: He that hath clean hands, and a pure heart. Not many then! And it is exactly the same when I hear the gospel passage that we had today. It is the most wonderful and most scary passage in the bible. Wonderful because our good deeds are noticed. Terrifying because we have all passed by people begging, we could all give more. We have been found wanting.

Do we ignore it or give up now? That would be to take the passage in isolation. I am sure that Jesus intended to shock his listeners, to challenge them, and to make them think about every aspect of their life. He was a rabbi after all, used to teaching in hyperbole. We need to think about his teaching in the context of the whole of scripture.

Ezekiel speaks of God searching for the lost sheep, the weak, the powerless. Jesus in his ministry also includes in this category those who have lost their way in life, who have gone off the rails. For both Ezekiel and Jesus disobeying the law saddens God, but what really causes God's wrath is the abuse of power. When people are desperate, there will always be people ready to exploit them, whether by offers of loans which are crippling expensive, or travel to a new country with hollow promises of work. Every age has those who grow fat feeding upon the misfortune of others. These are clear abuses of power. But is doing nothing, when one has the opportunity to help, also an abuse of power? There were and always have been people who wanted the poor swept out of sight. In the days of Jesus the poor were allowed to glean, to get what they could of the leftovers after harvest, yet not all landowners allowed this. In this country it is not so many centuries ago that children could

be executed for poaching. There was often no compassion. The effect of this disregard of the needs of others, has, throughout the ages, led to as many deaths and as much misery as active exploitation.

It is easy for us to distance ourselves from those who actively oppress the poor, but it gets more difficult when we are talking about a failure to act. And I think that is precisely why Jesus used the examples he did. It is a continuous spectrum. At one end are those who are pure, at the other, those who have no feelings for anyone else. And we are somewhere in the middle, not pure, but capable of caring. We have helped someone, we have also failed to help someone. We are a bit lost.

The good news is that God is seeking out the lost, wanting each to come into the safety of the fold. The question we need to ask ourselves is whether we want to be rescued by God or are we actually hiding from him, so that we don't need to change our ways. It is as though God is holding out his hand to us, saying come with me, follow me, do as I do and everything will be fine. And he waits. He doesn't force us, or drag us unwillingly. He doesn't bribe us, or nag us. He has already shown us the way. He has demonstrated that the only way to perfect joy is love. Everything else brings fear and all the other negative emotions. But if we are generous and compassionate and loving, even if we are in pain, even if our human relationships are foundering, we will find that peace and joy that only comes from God.

This is because Christ is a king like no other. He does not rule with a rod of iron, he doesn't tax us, force us to fight for him, or even make life hard for us if we ignore him. No, Christ waits. He waits for us to discover his path, to realise that this world, all the beauty, all the life, all the love, is held in and by his love. Until we see the world in the light of Christ, we only see a fraction of the world. As scientists years ago saw the earth at the centre of the universe, so we see ourselves at the centre, with family and friends and all creation there for us. Christ the King shows us a different reality, where love, the love that radiates from God, is the driving force, holding all things in being. It is only when we accept that love and follow its path that we can find peace.

We are lost, but God holds out his hand to us to lead us to safety. That is the good news of the gospel. Amen.

