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St Columba: 11 July 2010
Another Good Samaritan story

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Amos 7:7-17
Luke 10:25-37

Last week I was a national church Hermeneutics Hui on sexuality. We were looking at the texts of terror for gay and lesbian people. There were biblical scholars, theologians and church leaders from the three tikanga of the Anglican Church; young people and older people, a few gay and most not.

We sat seriously and examined the texts and the historical contexts of the texts we looked at various possible and credible interpretations and we thoughts about our world and being people faithful to the gospel; to the good news of God in Christ for us today.

Once upon a time we might have thought that we had the stories sussed, knew what was what....today most us are aware that with contemporary scholarship, new scientific insights, awareness of biology and psychology we can't be so hasty to assume we know it all!

This God of ours is always turning things upside down and challenging the wise and lifting up what once seemed impossible or foolish.

When we began on this long season of ordinary Sundays after the great feasts of Easter and Pentecost I noted that the emphases we are offered by the lectionary were twofold:

1. The ministry of Jesus
2. Our ministry as disciples of Jesus

Today the lectionary offers us the oh-so-familiar parable of the Good Samaritan – can anything new be said? Can anything else be gained from considering it once more?

And the grim piece from the prophet Amos: it seems to me that the Amos story, difficult though it is to hear, and the parable told by Jesus that we are so familiar with, both tell us something about the motivation for Jesus ministry. They tell us something too about our attitude and actions if we want to be a disciple of the kingdom of God that Jesus proclaimed.

Both readings indicate something of a test, and both suggest a shaming, and both suggest mercy.

We don't like to think about our engagement with God in terms of testing, but there it is: a plumb line that sets the measure against which God will judge. Perhaps we could say to better effect that it 'sets a marker out clearly for us against which to measure ourselves in relation to God's expectation ... or rather our hope of eternal life!' (what that is another sermon)

And there is the righteous Jewish lawyer, checking out his access to his birth-right, to eternal life, with Jesus, with the fellow who has been preaching and teaching such controversial and shocking stuff that might appear to be moving people away from established practices and interpretations of the Torah. He thought he would catch him out in incorrect answers and thereby shame him!

Questions and answers in Jewish custom were much like they are in our courts of law...designed to catch out those who could not answer correctly... an incorrect answer would be shameful to the good Jew who sought always to live a holy and pure life according to the laws – and sought to know and be clear about what was to be done to remain part of the holy people of God. There were purification rites for when they fell short and needed restoration into the community of the righteous!

So here is Jesus, in a hurry to keep his appointment with Pilate, stopped and questioned by a lawyer! Could Jesus answer correctly and avoid being shamed? He turned the question around and addresses a question in turn to the lawyer about the law, asking him what the law says... “Love your neighbour as yourself” is the summary given back to Jesus by the lawyer. Another correct answer: so no shame their either. But that is not enough and the lawyer has another go: “Who is my neighbour?”

This is not so straight forward...what would Jesus do now?

Jesus tells a story about a victimised traveller... the parable we know as the Good Samaritan. The answer to the question is, surprisingly, “the one who showed mercy”

And then “go and do likewise!”

This would have been very difficult for this fine, Jewish lawyer to hear!

Nothing was said about keeping the law, the purity code, the sacrifices and keeping the festivals and all that.

The answer to the lawyers question about how he could secure his birthright and gain eternal life is to “*show mercy*”. And show it even to your enemy –that could be even to a bleeding, unclean Samaritan! The worst type of person he could think of!

When we really hear this story, in the light of Amos proclamation to the righteous people of Israel about God holding up a plumb line and judging the people’s commitment to the covenant and to a life lived with compassion for others, then we can be less confident about our own capacity to measure up. Nobody wants to listen and he is instructed to leave - much like the reading last week when Jesus sent out the seventy and instructed them to leave if the people would not listen!

It is clear that fulfilling the purity laws, and practices of the temple – not touching a bleeding, ritually unclean Samaritan, or putting temple attendance, prayers and tithes - even above the needs of an enemy - will do!

At the hui, it was clear that the texts we had traditionally used to exclude gays and lesbians from the community of the faithful could no

longer be used that way. The interpretations we had laid on them could not be supported by the context and words of the text themselves. And, the gospel demand to love, to show mercy, and to include in the community of God's faithful people set a new plumb line for us to measure up to.

It is clear to us who attend to Luke's writings, that Jesus spoke about and demonstrated to us, a compassionate God, who loved indiscriminately, who invited all to table fellowship and from whose company no one, whatever their circumstances, was to be excluded is the plumb line for us to measure up to.

From time to time each of us is called to measure the degree to which we are faithful to the call of God to treat every human being with love, respect and friendship. For we present the face of God in so many places and we simply do not know what lies behind the faces we see presented to us by others.

Some thing to think about. 6 June 2010

What should we expect?

“To whom much is given much will be expected” says a paraphrase of a familiar Biblical quote from Luke 12: 48b. It came to my mind in considering the recent budget when I was confronted with the inequality of the disposable income that would be left in the hands of individuals in the wake of the recent tax cuts. It left me wondering what it is we expect from our leaders...and in particular what we can expect from our Prime Minister who ranks in the list of the 20 wealthiest world leaders. My cynical self tells me to expect nothing from these wealthy people except self-interest and preferment flavoured with entitlement. The me I like better reminds me that it is from amongst those with the privilege of leisure time that some of the great innovations in science and memorable literature has come. Clearly the thread of Biblical challenge to those who have positions of privilege and plenty is to turn their concern to the wellbeing of those with less. Research in our time shows that social harmony and personal wellbeing is more readily achieved when the gap between the most wealthy and the poor is narrowed. So it seems to me that we can reasonable expect to see leadership that works to narrow that gap. Political approaches and leaders that see the wealth primarily in terms of individual acquisition works to keep this gap wide. On the other hand leaders and political approaches who see wealth as a national resource to be shared in the interests of the whole population function to narrow this gap. Our heritage as Christians is unambiguous about what we should be demanding of our leaders.

Susan