

New Kilpatrick

Sermon

20th January 2019

Matthew 21:33-46

Spirit... inspire us... call us again into life... reshape us continually... for your work is never done... and we doing do not remain the same people... but always being renewed... transformed through an imagination inspired by love... So be it... Amen

Remember the Harry Potter festival that never was... about two and a half years ago... Some things come back to haunt you...

This week I was asked to present a talk to the Scottish Church Theology Society... It honestly sounds a whole lot grander than it was... about our almost Harry Potter festival... leading to a discussion about using cultural stories such as Harry Potter and Dr Who... to help tell our faith story...

However... that wasn't the interesting bit... and the Society will probably agree with me on that... While there... I met a retired minister from South Africa... and we talked about the days after Mandela was released... meeting Desmond Tutu... Cyril Ramaphosa... the Truth and Reconciliation committee... but most significantly... he spoke of the very real emotion... standing with every ethnicity in South Africa... in the longest line he had ever been part of... as everyone... and for the first time it was everyone... waited to vote for a new president... He said... I can't remember all the politics and conversations of that day... but I do remember how it made me feel...

And the shallowness of talking about Harry Potter and the Bible... stood against how the Bible has been used... and still is... to put down some in society... or name call a particular body of people... as apartheid was justified on biblical grounds... along with antisemitism... homophobic prejudice... slave trade... subjugation of women and children... and a rather long and painful list of others... Perhaps we can twist my South African friend's words a little... we don't always remember what the Bible says... but we do remember the way it has been used to make people feel...

Which is where today's parable comes in... as it has been often used... for holy prejudice... and sacred discrimination...

Here is a story Jesus told... often used for anti semitic purposes... He spoke of a vineyard... the well known Old Testament image of the nation... whose owner sent slaves and servants... the prophets... all of whom were abused and killed... so he sent his son... but he too was killed... so now the landowner... will hand the vineyard over to other more grateful tenants... no longer the Jews... now it belongs to the Christians...

Or so it has often been interpreted... But of course... that is utterly incorrect... but you have to pause and consider... how often has the bible been used to justify isolating... subjugating... hurting... any group of people in our communities...

What the parable DOES say... is that it is the leadership... who has been unwelcoming to various representatives of the owner... so the Kingdom of God... will be taken from them... and given to a community that produces the fruits of the kingdom...

So the basis on which the owner will find new tenants... is not their ethnicity... or right beliefs... or religious observance... but that they produce the fruit of the kingdom...

Often we imagine a product is an end result of something... by their fruits you'll know them... and for the kingdom... perhaps that would be seen as 100 more followers... three local projects helped... It's like the GDP of heaven... But the kingdom doesn't really work like that... does it... The fruit of the kingdom isn't measured in a basketful of stuff...

The product of the kingdom... is not justice... but living justly... the product is not peace... but living peacefully with each other... the product is not love... but loving our neighbour... The actual product... is our response to those who come into the vineyard... The product of the kingdom... is seen at the beginning of the process... It's not an outcome... it's an income... the initial welcoming in... the grace that includes... in the compassion that influences...

So the original tenants had lost before they even got started... because they offered no welcome... compassion... grace towards their guests...

But parables aren't about other people... they are about us...

The welcome... the grace... the compassion with which we greet our guests... That is a hard one... because we want to say... and we can say... Yes... we make people welcome... we don't judge before we welcome... we speak generously of folk... and that should be affirmed...

But we're human... and so of course... it isn't always the case... and that is where it hurts... to hear... this parable... Many churches talk about being friendly... but research suggests... that tends to be focused towards those we already know... or the right kind of person... who is similar to us...

A few months ago... a student minister was visiting us... and it was impressive the number of folk who gathered round him... and rightly so... He went away wishing he was coming here for his probationary period... But that same Sunday... there were others in the middle of the hall... who didn't receive such a welcome... and were left...

Folk didn't know them... and thus weren't introduced to others...

We're all awkward about this... Heaven's I'm just as bad as the next person... I hate admitting I find it difficult and not all of us are good at small talk... All I try and do is take a person and introduce them to a group of others... But this parable hits us all... I love this place and the people... and none of us want to say there is ever someone who isn't welcomed unconditionally... who ever feels they are sitting in someone else's pew... or who isn't noticed and accompanied from the sanctuary... to the hall for coffee... I'd rather offend someone thinking they are new while they have been here all their life... than not welcoming someone who is here for the first, or second time...

And it is today's parable... that holds that mirror up to us... and that peculiar way the product of the kingdom... is seen in what happens at the beginning of a relationship... how we live towards folk... how welcome we make them feel... and not the basket of good works at the end...

But then you read the parable again... and would you know it... the welcome thing gets bigger... holding a mirror up to us again... (don't you hate how often the Bible does that)... and confronts us with different versions of the owners' servants... a Jew... a Muslim... someone in a same sex partnership or equal marriage... mental ill-health... different

cultures... backgrounds... because the parable has been misused in all these contexts... to justify denying people... the kingdom... because a lack of welcome is no less than that...

This is not meant to be a litany of guilt... it is only trying to stretch the parable... for our own context... and let it ask the question it is meant to ask of us... because we are the tenants... and when we talk of the fruit of the kingdom... our welcome shapes the space for folk to immediately know they are in the kingdom... and it is the kingdom we live by... It is nothing we will say... but everything about how we make them feel...

And there's that phrase that keeps bouncing around in this parable... from that white South African minister at the theology conference... people will not remember what you said to them... but they will remember how you made them feel...

Which is maybe the phrase... that best interprets this parable... and moves us from parable to practice... people will not remember what we say to them... but they will remember how we make them feel... May the fruit of the kingdom we produce here... be found in the welcome they never forget...

References

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