

Sermon, Sunday 1 October, Silvia Purdie

with Communion

Bible Readings

Matthew 21:28-32

Philippians 2:1-13

So, here's Jesus' story. It's a classic: short and sweet, seemingly harmless but it swings round and slams you between the eyes.

So, there's a vineyard owner who has 2 sons. He says to one of them, "Son, I need you to work in the vineyard today. Will you go?" and the young fella says 'no'. ... 'Yeah nah'. But actually ruder than that, like "Piss off Dad. I got better things to do than boring old vine trimming. Get lost."

But then, Jesus doesn't say why, the son changes his mind, grabs his secuturs and water bottle, heads to the vineyard and puts in several hours of decent work.

Meanwhile the father tries his other son. "Son, I need you to work in the vineyard today. Will you go?" and that Son replies, "Yes sure Dad, of course, no problem, I'm right on it. I'm here for you Dad." But somehow he just doesn't go. Maybe he wanted to but just didn't get round to it. Maybe he really didn't want to in the first place. Who knows? Point is, he didn't do the job.

So, Jesus turns this simple little story back onto his listeners, who were by the way the righteous Jewish leaders who were looking for ways to discredit Jesus. Jesus asks them, "Which of the sons did the will of the Father?"

(in the translation we heard this morning, Which one of the two did what his father wanted?)

They rather nervously answer, 'the first son'. Obviously the right answer, yes? I mean, the first son was rude and obnoxious, clearly out of line, not the kind of kid you'd be proud of, but OK he came through, he did actually do what the father asked him to do.

And Jesus had them then! – So, the obnoxious people, the rude ones, the people in our communities we are ashamed of, who are totally out of line, these people have heard the good news and responded to me. They have done the will of the Father, not you, you who say all the right things and get all the respect – you so-called holy people are not doing what God wants of you at all!

See how he did that, Jesus just tipped it all upside down so that what was good is bad and what was wrong is right and what you thought mattered suddenly doesn't, and we're left looking in the mirror through the lens of this story forced to ask ourselves – well, which one am I, the first son or the 2nd son? Do my words ring hollow? Do my actions betray my intentions? Do I do the will of the Father?

The obvious question then becomes – OK, so what does that look like? What is it that God wants of us that is so much more important than saying all the right things? Well lucky for us, Paul answers this question, right here in our reading today from Philippians:

have the same love, be in full accord and of one mind. ³ Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. ⁴ Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others.

Follow Jesus, says Paul, let the mind of Jesus show us what God wants and what God is doing among us.

and then Paul writes out the words of what may well be one of the church's earliest hymns. This is a well-worked summary of the Christian faith in 6 lines, some of the most important and closely studied verses in the Bible. 6 verses. The first and the last verse are a unity of Jesus and God,

Christ Jesus in the form of God ... Jesus Christ is Lord to the glory of God

Then the first three verses step down from that unity as Jesus comes down, to humanity,

and then right in the very middle is the cross. Then the last 3 verses Jesus is raised up into glory. This is astonishing poetry and theology. I'll read it again for you slowly and I invite you to close your eyes and breathe a little deeper and let the words spark pictures in your mind's eye, emotions, questions.

Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God,
did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited,
⁷ but emptied himself,
taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness.
And being found in human form,
⁸ he humbled himself
and became obedient to the point of death— even death on a cross.
⁹ Therefore God also highly exalted him
and gave him the name that is above every name,
¹⁰ so that at the name of Jesus
every knee should bend,
in heaven and on earth and under the earth,
¹¹ and every tongue should confess
that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

I'm sorry. This isn't really much of a sermon. I don't have any important theological points to make about all of this. I don't have any ethical principles for how you should live your life or what kind of church we ought to be.

I just want to let the scripture speak for itself today. This provocative story and this breathtaking poem. Here's how Paul sums it up:

for God is at work in you, empowering you to both will and to work for his delight.

For that is what I desire for my own life: a union of will and work, an integrity of word and action so that what I say and what I do has something of a Jesus ring to it. I figure that Communion is helpful in this. It's great for taking us out of our words and giving us something tangible to hold and do: eat and drink. Do this in remembrance of me – not just talking about it. But it's not just the action of receiving Communion; it's just bread and grape juice, it's not magic. What does form and remake us isn't eating and the drinking, it is the hunger of the soul that reaches for the bread and the cup. It is the knowing that you and I are totally unworthy of the blood and body of Christ but daring to receive it anyway because he said we had to because only by facing our hunger and our hypocrisy and our unworthiness and the emptiness of our words and the pitiful poverty of our actions, but still reaching for the bread and the cup because Jesus himself reaches for us in these things. He is the one, the only one, who ever did the will of the Father fully and utterly. The rest of us will always be mixed up, bit of this, bit of that, yes God, no God, breaking promises, setting out for more than we achieve, letting him down, letting other people down. And still he feeds us. Still he empowers us to will and to work for the glory of God. Still he loves us.

As we gather up our offerings, I call on you to gather up your hunger as well as your generosity. I invite you to bring your need for God, as well as what you have to bring. For this is the will of the Father, that we come to Jesus, and do as he did, emptying ourselves, humble, in simple trust, a simple 'yes'.