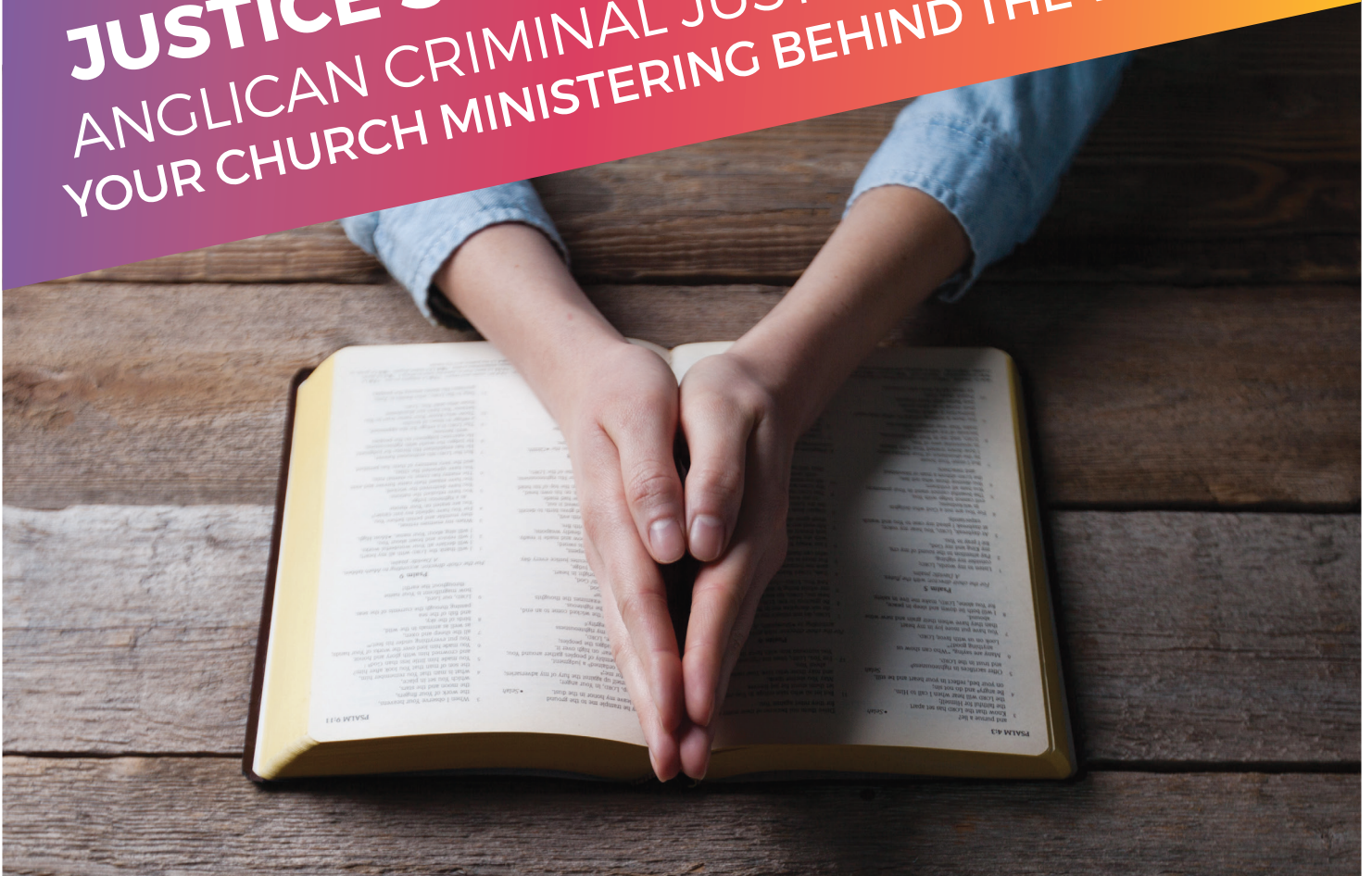


JUSTICE SUNDAY

ANGLICAN CRIMINAL JUSTICE MINISTRY: YOUR CHURCH MINISTERING BEHIND THE WALLS



0367/2019

Sermon for Anglican Justice Sunday

This year, our diocese will be joining with the rest of the state to celebrate Justice Sunday. Justice Sunday seeks to highlight the work of the Anglican Criminal Justice Ministry, whose chaplains serve in all prisons in all diocese, as well as ministering to those who have been released, helping them to re-join the outside world with confidence and hope in God. Join us to hear more about how God is working in the justice system in Victoria.

THE PRODIGAL SON

At the heart of the Bible is the message of the Gospel: that God reached out to a humanity that was not interested in Him. This is what we call grace. Grace is “undeserved love”, though surely love in its essential form is always undeserved; not granted to others in a grudging or cautious “quid pro quo”, but instead, generously lavished, almost recklessly bestowed from those who give to those who need. This is not to say that the lover experiences no return, even when the recipient is unable or unwilling to respond. The Apostle Paul, writing some 25 years after Jesus’ death and resurrection, came closest to the perfect description of love in his letter to the church at Corinth (1 Corinthians 13), but prefaced it by reminding his readers that “without love we are nothing”. What can be strange to our modern ears about Paul’s words is that he describes love primarily not as something that is received, certainly not as a feeling, but essentially as something that is lived and given: Paul believes that we find our significance primarily not by being loved, but by loving.

We see this message repeated all throughout the Bible, and nowhere more than in the gospels themselves: the accounts of God, who in his loving of humanity, took on the very flesh of his creation, and humbled himself even to death on the cross for our sake. Perhaps the most famous Bible verse in the world speaks of this: “for God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten son, to the end that whoever believed in him might have eternal life” (John 3:16). Many of the stories we find in the gospels are familiar to people, even if they have not read one of the gospels for themselves. There are stories of things Jesus did, stories about people’s reactions and responses to him (both positive and negative), and many stories that Jesus himself told in order to teach his audience about God. We call these stories “parables”. It is a good thing to know these stories, but our very familiarity with them, and cultural distance from their original telling, means we can sometimes miss the radical nature of this generous, beautiful, healing love: we do not hear them through our racist hatred of all things Samaritan as the original audience did, we miss the moral repugnance the Pharisees had against the woman caught in adultery or the woman who washed Jesus’ feet, and we do not see those who work in the ATO as traitors to their people as tax-collectors were when they worked for the Roman occupiers in Jesus’ day.

One of the most well-known parables is the one we commonly call “The Prodigal Son”. It’s a strange title, for the word “prodigal” means “generous”, and as we’ll see, it is not the younger son in the story who displays generosity, but the father. Some have suggested that a better title would be “The Wasteful Son” or even, “The Son Who Brought Shame to His Family”. It’s the story of a man who has two sons, the younger one of whom is so eager to receive his inheritance that he can’t wait for his father die... the father isn’t even complaining that he’s

feeling a trifle unwell! Jesus' original audience, being people of a time and place which highly valued an ordered family where children were obedient and respectful to their parents would have been scandalised! They would have heard this boy telling his father that he wishes his father was dead. What is even more shocking than the younger son's request to Jesus' original hearers is the father's agreement, and the boy is in due course given his share of the family farm, which he then sells off, and wastes no time in disappearing with the money to live a life of studied indulgence.

Dad is left with the older brother on half the farm, to their embarrassment and shame in front of the others in the village, while the new owners take over what used to be their land. Now, in those days, men of a certain age would gather regularly to sit together by the town gate, to discuss important affairs, and consider disputes between people of the town, sort of like a magistrate's court crossed with a barber's shop. These men were considered wise by virtue of their years and experience, though we are left to wonder at how high our hero felt himself able to hold his head, as everyone in the village would have known the crazy decision he made to give his useless son so much authority over his land.

Meanwhile, the son has gone to a foreign land to spend his money, which, like today, did not last long, and after a time of extravagance, surrounded by people eager to help him spend his cash, the boy finds himself alone and destitute: abandoned by the people he had thought loved him, but who had only valued his money. In the end, he is reduced to taking a job feeding pigs – a job that would have brought even more shame upon his family had they known, as pigs were considered unclean by his countrymen; and the job paid so little that he considered supplementing his own diet by picking out of the pigs' slop anything he considered he might be able to stomach himself.

Finally, having lost significant weight due to hunger, as well as his pride and inheritance, he realises he has another option. He can return home, but decides he can only do so on his own terms. "I will say to my father: Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you, I am no longer worthy of being called your son; take me on as one of your hired men". The word Luke tells us Jesus used for "hired men" is important: it does not mean, in our 21st century terms "a servant", but more like "a subcontractor" or a "tradesman": someone who is his own boss, and has a social standing as such in his community. He might have lost his weight and inheritance, but he can still see a clever way of keeping his pride, and this is his focus. This is not the plan of a man who is remorseful about the hurt he has caused; these are not the words of someone who is asking for mercy from someone they have wounded; it is the voice of someone whose interest is primarily fixed upon his own needs and wants, at whatever expense it costs another. He accepts he is going to have to go through a form of apology, but his message is clear: "Give me more". It is the voice of entitlement.

Back home, Dad is still sitting at the town gate, no doubt keeping his head down and saying less than he used to, having been shamed by his own reckless generosity as much as his younger son's disrespect and rejection. We can imagine, over the months since the incident, he has been reminded of it in not entirely subtle ways by others in the town, particularly, I would think, by those who sit with him at the gate as the usual small-town politics are played out. Yet still he comes, and sits. One day though, the other elders of the village are surprised by his activity: he stands up and runs down the dusty road, robes flapping wildly in his haste. They peer after him, scarcely believing that further down the road is a lonely form that looks vaguely like the father's younger son. No doubt they prepared themselves for a show, just as Jesus' audience, listening to him tell the parable would have shared knowing grins with each other at this point in the story. The culture of shame and honour of that time and place allowed and even demanded revenge for the father: this would be fun to watch for the townspeople, and exciting to listen to for Jesus' audience! The expectation was that this young wastrel would be grabbed by the scruff of the neck and frog-marched before the elders at the gate: "Give me justice!" the father would cry, before beating him mercilessly in front of all.

Yet we know what happens: instead of this expected scenario, the father throws his arms around the very one who has made of him a laughing stock! "My son, my son!" he cries through tears, as he calls for fine clothes to cover the shame of the young man's pig-stained rags, now ruined further by days and weeks of walking home on dusty roads and sleeping rough by the roadside. Sandals are put on his feet, and then a family ring: the authority in those days to spend family money is slipped on his finger as the father loses his battle to his tears of joy. The son is bewildered, confused, and overwhelmed: he had a speech prepared, one that would pay passing homage to his father's feelings before demanding that to which he was not entitled. He speaks, and in that moment, the words become real: "Father I have sinned against heaven and against you, I am no longer worthy of being called your son" and there he stops. There is no need to make demands for less than that which he has already received by grace. His spoken words are spoken now not to manipulate, but to respond to the love, totally undeserved, that he now realises is still, and always was his own.

The two questions which are central to all our lives: "am I worthy of love?", and "can I trust others to love me?" have been answered for this son without a trace of ambiguity; and he has been changed by the realisation that this was and will be always so. Perhaps though, the story has been titled right regardless: for though it is the father's loving generosity that we have seen, it is only those who know themselves so loved who have the quiet confidence to love others in similar manner. We do not know anything more about the younger son, but who could not be changed by such fantastic, such amazing grace? We have an example of such change elsewhere in the gospel: the woman who washes Jesus' feet with her tears and dries them with her hair. Jesus comments that she loves much because she has been forgiven much: grace encountered is grace transforming.

This thought is seen also in the second act of the Parable of the Prodigal Son: for we cannot forget that there is yet another older brother, who doesn't yet know of what has transpired while he has been, as always, working in the fields of a now diminished family farm. He arrives back at the house to the sounds of music, of a gathering... of a party, and according to all rules of his culture he is expected to be one of the hosts, yet the father has been in so much of a hurry to celebrate, that the party has begun even before all family members have come home from the fields! The fatted calf can be smelt as it roasts, and guests are arriving even as the work-stained older son is asking one of the servants what is happening. He's not pleased to hear that his brother is home, and even less that this soiree of largess is to honour his return... after all, he reasons, everything his brother didn't sell off just before he left now rightfully belongs to him! We hear this in his protestations to his father, who is now again dishonoured in his neighbours' eyes as he leaves his guests to beg his older son to join the celebrations! The older son is incensed: dad has never given him even a young goat to party with his friends, yet here he is, throwing good fatted calves after bad as he celebrates what? The father tries one more time: "everything I have is yours" he pleads, "but we had to celebrate, for that which was lost has now been found, he who was dead is alive!"

There is no answer from the older son; in fact, the parable is as incomplete as a four-line "knock knock" joke. In the Aramaic which Jesus spoke, there were rules as to how parables were constructed as there are rules about "knock knock" jokes today, and this parable is supposed to end with a resolution of some sort, now regarding the father and the older son. Once again, the crowd would have been hoping for some entertainment: the older son grabbed by the scruff of the neck and dragged against his will into the house to stand beside the father with a smile painted on, as Dad makes a speech about how happy the whole family is to welcome Junior home. Or maybe, given the surprise grace the father has exhibited to the younger son, this ungrateful boy may too find himself loved in surprising ways? Jesus doesn't say, and for good reason: the parable, along with the two that preceded it, are told to the Teachers of the Law, who in the first two verses of Luke 15 have mocked Jesus and his supposed holiness as a Man of God. "This man welcomes sinners" they scoffed, "and even eats with them!". Their idea of holiness revolved around separation: keeping themselves "pure" by not touching those who were unclean or sinful: those who were not worthy of love by God or them. In contrast, Jesus' understanding of holiness was about love: holding a dinner to which those who thought themselves unworthy were invited, and honoured. The question in the hearers' minds about the older son's response to the Father's grace can only be answered by the Teachers of the Law to whom Jesus is telling the parable: will they come and pull up a chair, or continue to separate themselves from both those they deem unworthy of their love, and by extension, the God whose joy is made complete when we come home? The irony being, that only through their own encounter with the Father's grace will they be able to be transformed and be prodigal themselves.

Today is Justice Sunday. And the idea of “justice” is at best complex, at worst the source of deep division in our community. It embodies elements and questions of balancing different rights and responsibilities, of power and who holds it. For some, it is primarily concerned with penalties for wrongdoing; when a punishment is deemed to light, we hear cries that “justice has not been done”. On Justice Sunday we remember our Anglican prison chaplains throughout Victoria, serving with Anglican Criminal Justice Ministry (or ACJM). Women and men who faithfully attend our prisons, serving God by coming alongside the over 7000 men, women and young people who are incarcerated. Chaplains are forgiven sinners, ministering to others who have sinned, which is not to say that the stories they hear of both sins committed and sins received are easy to listen to. And having heard so many stories, often over many years, there are few who take more seriously the hurt that people bring to others than a prison chaplain.

ACJM chaplains minister to people who have been judged and sentenced already, or who are waiting on remand for their trial. The people to whom they minister range in their attitudes from unrepentant and entitled (like the Prodigal Son before he encountered his father’s grace), to those who are incredulous and deeply ashamed at their own past actions. A chaplain’s prayer is always to be a means of grace, which is not to excuse and diminish responsibility, but to point to the God who is the source of new beginnings. For some who hear God’s word behind the prison walls, it is the first time they realise their need of grace, the first time they understand that no-one has to be defined by their past alone; that God calls us into a new relationship with Himself wherever we are, but He loves us too much to leave us as He finds us... we are defined by our future which is secure in God, and our present which is always changing as we are transformed by the renewing of our mind. Behind the walls ACJM chaplains provide pastoral care, lead worship, challenge entitlement, “show and tell” the Kingdom of God, and are regularly reminded of the scandalous beauty of God’s love: his “amazing grace”. This Justice Sunday, our Anglican chaplains ask for our prayers, and for their fellow Anglicans to seriously consider if God is laying such a ministry on your heart: joining with them either through financially supporting the work or joining as a volunteer. You may never have considered such a role, but for all of us, grace encountered is grace transforming.

Let us pray:

Gracious God, who did not count the cost of our own reconciliation as too dear a price to pay; move and speak and act in grace through our Anglican chaplains ministering in prisons this week. Keep them safe, and strengthen them for the work they do. Continue, we pray, to transform each one of us by the renewing of our minds and the experience of Your grace. In Jesus’ name, Amen.