

# Not Like Religion at All

Sermon for the 22<sup>nd</sup> Sunday after Pentecost, Year C, 20 October 2013

St Philip's Anglican Church, O'Connor, ACT

Revd Canon Dr Scott Cowdell

Genesis 32: 22-31; Psalm 121; 1 Timothy 3: 10—4:5; Luke 18: 1-14

+In the Name of the Father & of the Son & of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

It's good to be with you again at St Philip's, and in her absence I thank your Rector, Rebecca, for her welcome invitation.

Many Anglicans of my vintage and older were brought up to think of religion in terms of respectability, propriety and moral superiority. Going to Church, or at least being nominally associated with it, was a sign of your worth and goodness. It was an innately conservative business, too, with God as the great conservative, presiding over the status quo. My upbringing was in the Queensland of Sir Joh Bjelke Petersen, who expected the churches to agree with him and was upset when they didn't. I remember when our mild English scholar Archbishop, Felix Arnott, called off the traditional Palm Sunday procession of all the Anglican parishes through the inner city in sympathy with the student demonstrators, because Joh's government had banned their protest marches. Joh's response was to call Archbishop Felix a communist! My staunch conservative-voting parents were scandalised, too.

Yet the heart of our gospel is that law and rectitude, self-righteousness and spiritual pride are completely opposite to who Jesus is and what he does. Respectable Christians never grasp the

horror and shame and embarrassment of the cross, for instance, which puts God on par with the riff raff, the losers, the scum and the dregs of society. I remember asking a patient once when I was hospital visiting if he'd like me to hear his confession, since he was about to go under the knife, and he replied with outrage 'I've never been to jail'! Like many older Anglicans he mistook sin for crime; he couldn't imagine that he might be a sinner who needed to repent, let alone needing a saviour.

Sadly, many Anglicans fail to appreciate just how radical and unconventional our God actually is, who looks past our pride and our self-sufficiency to our deepest needs and our hidden shame—who meets us in our fragility, and who doesn't want us to divert ourselves by keeping up appearances. *Our* accustomed idea of God might be like this, but the God of Jesus Christ is *not* like this. Friends, this is a message that comes to us in various ways through today's readings.

First our Gospel, with its two parables: one with an unjust judge, and one with a Pharisee and a tax collector. The unjust judge is a figure of human law and respectability, though not one of compassion. The judge resents the pushy woman who in her need won't leave him alone in her quest for justice. She and her problems are beneath him. He's about maintaining control, not about blessing and empowering people—in fact, he's like the wrong idea of God. Jesus compares this judge with the God of Israel, the real God, who couldn't be more different in his concern that justice is done and that victims of life are liberated. Jesus draws a sharp distinction here: God is not on the side of the powerful and indifferent, but on the side of the downtrodden, preferring the company of those who know they have no helper.

Jesus rubs in this point by contrasting another representative of law, respectability and conservatism, the Pharisee, with a tax collector,

who was of course turncoat scum serving the foreign ownership of resources.

Today we love to lay blame and feel superior, don't we? Religious people were a cut above in the world of my upbringing, and still today respectability is worn as a badge of honour. In the US, for instance, the Tea Party Republicans hate to see those they disapprove of get any benefit from the public purse, so they'll wreck the government before they let it give money to unwed mothers and others among the undeserving poor through Obamacare.

Another example, closer to home. In our own country many people oppose gay marriage, not for biblical reasons that I'm sure many don't understand, but because being married is a mark of respectability. According to this view marriage is socially superior to mere co-habitation, let alone to same-sex unions. In the eyes of such people, to elevate same-sex unions to the status of marriages would debase the coinage that they themselves have prospered from, and hence diminish their social position. Young people don't think this way and by and large they're not concerned about this issue—but a lot of older people are, and I suggest that it's not necessarily for properly spiritual reasons.

I remember Gene Hackman's character in the civil rights film *Mississippi Burning*, explaining that his poor white trash father used to hate African Americans because there had to be someone in society who was lower than him. And this attitude is what we see exposed in today's second Gospel parable. The prayers of the Pharisee are prayers of self congratulation and self-justification, which miss entirely the nature of God—because God's ears are open instead to the tax collector: to the one who knew his sin and his need and who knew who God was, a God of love and forgiveness. Not a

very respectable God, and not a very religious God, is he, this God of Jesus Christ?

Friends, there are some things about living with this unconventional, disreputable God that our other readings fill in for us today. Look at Jacob in our Genesis reading. Meeting this God is a struggle, involving conflict and disorientation, and Jacob limps away from the encounter. Meeting our God isn't compatible with a trouble-free passage throughout a conventional life by any means. But in the encounter Jacob does receive a new name, a new identity, and so do we in our baptism. And look at the figure of Timothy in our Epistle today, a young protégé of Paul who's here receiving instructions about what the task of Christian ministry is going to be like. He's warned that if he's faithful in ministry he'll encounter opposition and hardship. Still, he must be faithful to the Gospel and all its potentially unwelcome and confronting implications, rather than settle for just giving people what they want. This is a temptation to which many clergy succumb in our day, worn down by churchgoers and congregations who insist on the respectable and the conventional and who resist the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

So what about you and me? Our psalmist today seems to be reflecting on a similar state of affairs when he begins, "I lift my eyes to the hills, but where shall I find help?" In other words, I look to the high places where the pagan gods used to be looked for, but we don't look to them anymore, so where am I going to find help? This is a rhetorical question, because of course he knows. His help is the God of Israel, who chose a defeated people and loved them and made them God's people, and who has never forsaken his chosen ones.

Friends, you and I are in for some disappointment if we come here to Church to polish our respectability or as a sign of what fine people we are, because the God we meet here, the God of Jesus Christ, has a different agenda. The God of Jesus Christ offers his broken body and blood poured out in solidarity with all the brokenness and lostness and sin and failure and sadness and defeat of our human condition, and bids us come as we are—not as we'd like to think we are, not in denial about who we are, but *as we are*. The God of Jesus Christ reclaims us today in word and sacrament, just as we are, and so we can drop the self-justification.

The Lord be with you...