

Conform or reform?

St Philip's Anglican Church, O'Connor
Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost
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Exodus 33.12-23; Psalm 99; 1 Thessalonians 1.1-10; Matthew 22.15-33

Have you ever wondered why children seem to say the most insightful and uncanny things? Even those children who are insulated from religion by their parents seem to know something or feel something. Little wonder Jesus said you have to be as children to enter the Kingdom. I was speaking to some folk the other day; we were considering this childlikeness and I suggested that we were 'born remembering something.' I thought that was a great quote—it's not mine, but at the time I couldn't remember where I'd read it.

For how shall it be known that I have found favour in your sight, I and your people, unless you go with us? In this way, we shall be distinct, I and your people, from every people on the face of the earth.

We live in difficult times in the Church today. Though of course it never has been easy; it's not meant to be easy. It is when we are at ease that we need to think again, because we have probably been conformed to the world. St Paul warned the Romans against this; we are called to reform not conform and that's tough. The place which we belong and strive for, this kingdom into which Jesus has been beckoning us over the past weeks, is not a place of ease.

Over the past few weeks we have heard Jesus speaking in parables about the Kingdom of God. He has been comparing it with what he sees around him and, after a time, the leaders of the day realise that he is speaking about them; they are in the cast of these dramatic parables and they react. Today, the elites finally conspire to destroy him; it is the beginning of the end. Our gospel this morning features the aristocracy, the judiciary, and the temple. The Herodians, the Pharisees and the Sadducees—three groups that do not ordinarily agree on much—form an unholy trinity to bring Jesus down. There's no integrity in this alliance! It's reminiscent of that ancient proverb 'the enemy of my enemy is my friend.' Winston Churchill apparently commented to his personal secretary on the eve of Germany's invasion of the Soviet Union that 'if Hitler invaded Hell, I would make at least a favourable reference to the Devil in the House of Commons.'

The three groups, despite their differences, shared one thing in common: their authority is very tenuous, they stood on shifting sand. The Herodians are merely puppets of the Roman occupiers, doing the bidding of Rome, they are not well liked; Pilate's dislike of Herod is matched by the folk on the streets. The Pharisees, the lawyers, the keepers of the law, have been found out. I love that comment of Jesus when he says to the crowds, 'listen to what the Pharisees say, but don't do as they do!' The Sadducees are the keepers of the temple which Jesus has predicted will be destroyed; by the time the Gospels were written, the Romans had indeed razed the Temple to the ground.

These three factions display their insecurity by lashing out at Jesus. So what then of us? Is it not true that we have a somewhat tenuous place in the midst of society? We know that the church has lost authority in many areas. Are we that different from those folk who challenged Jesus' authority? On one level, no, we are not so very different, as much as we might like to think that we are. And on that level we, too, reveal our insecurity at different times. We don't react by lashing out at Jesus, but the temptation is to conform rather than reform. Our calling is to strive to live on a different level, that of the Kingdom—and that's a very different country.

Sometimes it seems hopeless and we are at different times prone to echo those words of Moses: 'For how shall it be known that I have found favour in your sight, I and your people, unless you go with us? In this way, we shall be distinct, I and your people, from every people on the face of the earth.'

There are no simple answers to this and different folk will respond in different ways. I would like to suggest that it is by looking to the *sacraments* that we can glimpse the answer. In the fourth century, St Leo the Great famously said 'after the Ascension, our Redeemer's presence has passed into the sacraments.' Over the Synod weekend, Jeannette spoke here of the beauty of springtime, and it is in the created order that our understanding of sacrament begins. The beauty and order of the natural world carry within themselves the fingerprints of God. Again in Romans, Paul tells those who doubt God's presence:

there's no excuses, for what can be known about God is plain to them. Ever since the creation of the world God's eternal power and divine nature, invisible though they are, have been understood and seen through the things he has made.

The creation has a sacramental quality, something of God's order and beauty have passed into creation.

But, yes, anyone can look at the universe and be filled with awe and wonder. What is distinct about us is that we find—or at least strive to find or are called to find—this same wonderment, enchantment, in the ordinary and the less than attractive or awe inspiring; it is that that makes us different, distinct. That is the answer to Moses's question: 'For how shall it be known that I have found favour in your sight, I and your people, unless you go with us?'

The vision of God in the Old Testament was a narrow one. Indeed today's reading suggests that God's backside as was Moses was permitted to see! Ours is a broader vision, and that is the mark of us and our ministry. If we are able to grasp that vision, we will indeed find that our insecurities have no foundation. If we live sacramentally, we will find Jesus—and through him the God that he called *Abba*—in all places, all people and all situations. In this way, we shall be distinct because we will be seen to be people of broad vision. The factions that challenged Jesus held to a narrow vision and, in the case of the Sadducees, Jesus tells them 'you are wrong: you know neither the scriptures nor the power of God.'

We might be considered crazy idealists, but Christ, in the scriptures we have been considering over the past weeks, is telling us that these seemingly hopeless longings are coming from a place beyond, a time apart, the Kingdom of God, another country that we glimpse sacramentally and that in the words of Richard Holloway (Yes, I did remember!) 'We are born remembering.' Amen.