

Status Anxiety

St Philip's Anglican Church, O'Connor
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Amos 5: 6-7, 10-15; Psalm 90: 12-17; Hebrews 4: 12-16; Mark 10: 17-31

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Friends, there are many leaders in the world today—leaders of nations, leaders of opinion, captains of finance and industry—who remind us of the leaders Amos criticises in our first reading today. They lived in palaces of hewn stone, drinking the finest wines, while corruption flourished, while the poor and needy were trampled, while anyone speaking the truth was abhorred. And so they do today. It is ever thus in our world of insiders and outsiders, our world of winners and losers, our world of enemies and allies—the world, that is, that we humans prefer, always and everywhere.

Yet our God is different from us. Our God takes the part of the outsider, of the failed, of the defeated and the helpless—as Amos declares today, proclaiming God's justice, and our psalmist today, calling on a God of mercy and pity. Ours is a God who does not judge by appearances, a God who cuts through the culture of death-dealing lies and gets to the truth of things. This is the God whose word divides between bone and marrow, according to our Hebrews reading today—in other words, cutting through the divisions and exclusions we impose on others to make the world more to our liking. So it is that our frailty and neediness is revealed and accepted by God, removing our need for self-deception, so that we can accept ourselves and others. This is what Jesus did after all, by becoming a frail human among the rest of us frail humans. And friends, if this is our high priest, if this is our exalted one, then we need never big note ourselves or try to dominate others, because true greatness is different, as Jesus reveals to us from God.

Now friends I offer all of this by way of introduction to my comments on today's Gospel. I think today's well-loved story of the young man who preferred his wealth over following Jesus is often interpreted as a moral fable about the nobility of poverty, but I suggest that there's a lot more to it than that. The key to really getting inside this passage is to see it as a story of envy and rivalry about status, which is the way of our world after all—a story, though, in which Jesus reveals a new world, and a new life for us all, beyond rivalry and status anxiety. Let me take you through it and show you what I mean.

The breakthrough for me with this passage came when I realised that the young man was not greeting Jesus with respect. We tend to think 'good teacher' or 'good master' is a respectful address, and that this is a decent young man, who Jesus found lovable. But John Pilch, a sociologist and New Testament scholar who studies the cultural background of Jesus' times, points out that this is really a scornful form of address: 'Good teacher' on the lips of the young man is less a term of respect and more a term of scorn or sarcasm, as if I said to someone 'O great one' or 'O wise one'—'tell me O great one', 'give us the benefit of your wisdom'. Put this way it can't help but sound sarcastic, can it? Seen this way, the young man's words in today's Gospel reveal his mood of resentment toward Jesus, his dismissal of Jesus as having anything significant to say on the subject of salvation.

This insight helps us understand Jesus' immediate reaction of to the young man, which otherwise makes little sense. Jesus diffuses his mocking praise: 'Why do you call me good? Only my Father in heaven is good'. This is because Jesus doesn't want to get caught up in the mood of rivalry that the young man brings to the encounter, and he doesn't want the bystanders to get caught up in it either. Then he tells the young man that the way to salvation is to follow God's law, which we know is given to us, like all laws, to restrain envy and

rivalry and the violence that they spurn. This is what the Ten Commandments do, commending a thankful life which isn't obsessed with coveting and self-assertion, because of course coveting and self-assertion lead in turn to stealing and anger and murder. The ten commandments are part of God's remedy for a human life dominated by envy, rivalry and their inevitable violent outworking.

But the young man is still talking in a spirit of rivalrous self-assertion: 'all these I have kept from my youth'. And so we see that he hasn't got a clue. When the passage says Jesus loved him, I think it's the same love that Jesus showed when he said, 'Father forgive them for they know not what they do'. Jesus loves all of us who don't have a clue, who think we're wise when we're really not, whose lives are dominated by the universal agenda of getting one up on others, of looking after me and mine and the rest be damned—in other words, Jesus loves all of us sinners, and perseveres with us, though he's no patsy and he's onto us.

Hence Jesus' next gambit in today's Gospel, in which he cuts the nerve of self-assertion altogether by pointing to the life that's possible beyond it— by pointing to his own life, and the life of his movement. If this young man is so rivalrous that he resents Jesus and even boasts about his 4 keeping the commandments, then Jesus offers him a life entirely beyond 'me versus you', beyond rivalry, beyond status. Jesus invites the young man to join his own group of dubious outsiders, to give up the status that comes with kinship, with family name and inherited property—of mother and father, of lands, as Jesus says.

I had a young Palestinian student once who'd done just this when he chose to become a Christian and be baptised. His Muslim father disinherited him and renounced him as his son. Now he's a priest in the Anglican Diocese of Jerusalem and the Middle East, with a hundredfold more brothers and sisters and fathers and mothers in the Church there, and persecutions no doubt, as Jesus wryly promises. This Palestinian priest is a real-world example of what it means to give up mother and father, and the lands he would have inherited, for the sake of Christ and the gospel.

The young man in today's Gospel reading saw the implications of Jesus' demand, yet so attached was he to his status advantages over others that he would not risk his status by opening himself to Jesus. So, friends, it's not primarily wealth that Jesus challenges here, but the sort of status anxiety that's attached to property, to name, to pedigree, along with wealth, all of which enables someone to feel that they're a cut above the rest. Jesus, however, is inviting the young man, and us, to a new way of living beyond all such business as usual—to a life beyond all 'the empty display and false values of the world', as our baptism liturgy puts it. This sort of thing is what makes the world go round for so many people, but not for Jesus. He stood with the outsiders in life and in death, thinking so little of his own status that he gave up everything for the Kingdom of God. This is the dangerous freedom of Jesus, who truly marches to a different drummer, and so can we who follow him; so can we who bear the mark of his cross on our foreheads in baptism; so can we who eat his flesh and drink his blood, which are given to us in this Eucharist only through the scandal and disgrace of Calvary.

The young man in our gospel reading couldn't face any of this, and nor can the world at large, which crucified Jesus and still manufactures countless victims as the price of our anxious self-assertion. But, friends, in this Eucharist that we celebrate, Jesus calls us and feeds us on a different human journey, beyond the sad obsession with status, with winning, that's so nearly universal. Please God may our Church and may we ourselves have the grace to live as if this were true, showing the world that there's more to life than business as usual in the world of dog eat dog.

The Lord be with you...