

Twenty-first Sunday after Pentecost - 2018

During my time as Chaplain to the Army Recruit Training Centre at Kapooka I was regularly confronted with young would-be soldiers trying to understand the organisation they had joined. It is an organisation that initially presents itself to them as one governed by a rigid rule book. And yes, there are standard operating procedures for doing everything from driving a tank to folding your socks. This rule book is meditated and interpreted through a powerful and equally rigid hierarchy. When you step off that bus on that Tuesday afternoon this is what you run into. You are put into section under the control of a corporal who tells you to follow me with your luggage, in your left hand; off you go. The majority of the recruits are more or less prepared for this.

But then in the coming days just as they feel they are coming to grips with this new regime and routine, perhaps almost becoming comfortable, they are confronted by something quite different. Suddenly there is a dawning, a realisation about what the rules are about and the way they need to be understood. Just when they felt some security in the rules their foundation is given a shake and for some it's a difficult experience. Many a time I would say to group of recruits, at this stage in your careers the Army aren't really interested in what you do... but what you are becoming.

We have just heard one of the most haunting, intriguing encounters with Jesus in the gospels. This bright, eager, rich young man runs up to Jesus and kneels before him, he is well prepared. [I used to have a Curate like him – he didn't kneel before me and he wasn't rich, but was always running because he generally late – I can't remember how many times I told him don't run in your cassock it's not dignified!] The rich young man too forgot about dignity in his rush: 'Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?' What must I *do*? Jesus goes along with him and lists some of the Ten Commandments, 'yes' he says 'I have done these' and then a lovely comment that only Mark recalls, 'Jesus looked at him and loved him.' Jesus isn't really all that concerned with his keeping the rules, he wants to know what this young man is becoming. Sell the riches that are in the way of your becoming and follow me.

In the same way, the wise, I won't say loving, military mentor is not always concerned with those who rigidly keep the rules. Yes, the recruit must get to know the rules, but he or she must understand them through a particular prism. The recruit is called to commit to the rules through the prism of the Army values of courage, respect, initiative and teamwork. These values are underpinned by Army doctrine which says that 'a soldier's moral and spiritual qualities are as important as physical fitness and skills perhaps more so when a soldier is under stress.' If only the Army would spend as much time on a soldier's moral and spiritual

qualities as they do on physical fitness! The values are relational, as are moral and spiritual qualities. The keeping of rules are about the way we live together the Army values are intrinsically relational. They ask of the recruit - are you courageous, respectful, innovative, a team player. The commandments that Jesus quotes are from the last part of the Decalogue, the Ten Commandments, they are concerned with love of neighbour.

Now it goes without saying that some parts of the church are too concerned with rules. Perhaps there is the potential for us all to become comfortable with just keeping rules. We fail to see the rules through a particular relational prism and this has the potential of making us oblivious to those things that impede our joining Jesus on that road, those things that impede our becoming. Many a good recruit has departed Kapooka disappointed, they kept the rules but failed to engage. Ultimately of course the Army are preparing you for war and we all know what happens to rules then. In much the same way Jesus knew that his road was a difficult arduous one it required the relational prism of faith, hope and love in the keeping of rules and regulations. And so the rich young man departs, like a failed recruit disappointed and saddened.

Amos is a prickly character, there are no smooth words from him like the professional prophets. He tells us 'I'm no prophet, just a herdsman and a dresser of sycamore trees.' He goes to the schismatic shrine at Bethel and the streets of Samaria with his message. The leisurely ladies of Samaria were not used to being spoken to in this way, nor were their prosperous husbands who copped the blast we heard this morning. Quite clearly their wealth is a stumbling block to God and life...seek the Lord and live. Amos is *the* prophet of social justice, his message rings down through the centuries. The young man's wealth is a barrier to his love of neighbour and that in turn is a barrier to following Jesus and to the life that he seeks.

There is nothing in these texts that allows us to soften the blow. These are indeed texts that divide soul from spirit, joints from marrow; that are able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart. We might keep the rules but there is something else far more significant that has the potential of keeping us from each other and from life, there is something else that has the potential of keeping us from becoming the people that we are truly called to be and that is our wealth. Jesus doesn't say the wealth is bad. What he is saying is that wealth, like the rigid keeping of rules and regulations is a sign of an insecurity that prevents us from fully giving of ourselves and becoming that to which we are called. We are called to be fully human, fully alive, in relationship. The Christian narrative is a riches to rags story, one in which, I pray, we gradually realise what is most important in life, and follow Jesus on the way. Amen.