

Sermon preached at King's College, Cambridge
October 9th, 2016

Isaiah 50.4-10; Luke 13:22-30

Then said one unto him, Lord, are there few that be saved?

In today's gospel reading Jesus has some tough things to say. Tough things to say about judgment: the door is narrow, the door will get shut, people will be left outside, there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.

But there is hope too. People will come from far and wide, from east and west, to take their places at the feast in the kingdom of God. Those who seemed at the back of the crowd will find themselves up front.

How do we hear these words? How do we *receive* them? I don't mean 'how do they make us feel?' I don't even mean (quite yet) 'what is Jesus saying to us?'

This is a story of Jesus' teaching which can seem harsh. It's not what some Bible scholars call a 'text of terror': that's reserved to stories like the rape of Tamar (in the Second Book of Samuel). But it is a text which can, and should, stop us in our tracks if we have been tracking a wee bit complacently. And that's because, usually, we hear it said straight to us – Jesus is talking straight to us, right?

Well, if the words of Jesus *don't* talk to us, we might as well as go home and stop all this. They really do talk to us, that's why we're doing all this. That's why we carry the book of the gospels into the heart of the chapel and read his words out loud.

But in that act of reverence, that ritualised treasuring of the stories of Jesus is a vital clue to how we do indeed hear and receive his words. Reverence before the words of Jesus, reverence before the stories of his earthly journey should be matched by a very real reverence before the medium of those words and stories – the Bible itself. It is absolutely fundamental in the Christian life to approach the Bible with a reverence and awe which properly appreciates what it is: a collection of writings made and re-made over more than a thousand years, by fragile, frail but faithful people who nonetheless have been galvanised and empowered by the Spirit of God to bear prophetic witness to the work of God.

This holy union of human effort and divine grace – which characterises the Christian life as a whole – has given us a Bible which we should take seriously. Joyously seriously. We should bow before the work of God's grace in it, such that – as Rowan Williams has said – the text interrogates us, not the other way round.

At the same time, we must share with all due humility in the human aspect of it, and try to understand the very writing of it, appreciate the rich complexity of the Bible as a collection of human words grappling with divine truth. And so we can dare to try to understand things like social context and literary genre. This isn't (or certainly shouldn't be) reductive or relativizing: done properly it is part of a faithful, humble and mature engagement with the Bible.

With all that in mind, we can turn back to today's gospel reading. Before we try to hear what Jesus is saying directly to us, we need to ponder what his words were saying then. That means what he was saying in the particular episode; and in the whole sweep of his ministry.

Within the story itself, it is most likely that Jesus was having one of his many digs at Jewish self-satisfaction, especially as found in the religious leadership of the time. Joy at the sense of being chosen by God can all too easily turn to pride, with all that that leads to. This is not limited to first century Judea. So immediately the acknowledgement of the story's context, what we might call the surface meaning, has something to say to us pretty directly: and that's before we get to the substance of what Jesus is saying about judgment.

Then when we look at the whole of Jesus' ministry, at those three years of teaching, healing and saving, we have a much better chance of hearing what Jesus is saying in any particular moment. The enormity of his mission, and the infinite riches of his divinity, cannot be derived neatly from one story or saying. That way lies pharisaical proof-texting, a particularly unfruitful way of engaging with the Bible. Only the whole of the Biblical witness begins to do

justice to that enormity, those riches: so we need to range back and forth through that witness as a whole if we want to hear the fullness of Jesus' meaning in any particular episode. In this case, stepping back to look at the whole canvas lets us see places where Jesus talks not of judgement and weeping but of being lifted up to draw all people to himself, and of coming not to condemn the world but save it.

But what about judgement? We will be judged. In today's gospel passage and elsewhere, Jesus is completely straightforward – we will be judged. The language of the narrow door, the locked door, and, in other places, the language of reaping and sickles and harvesting and burning - all this may be figurative, imaginative; but that's only because it's almost impossible to talk literally, in the language of this world, about the final things, about the things of the world to come – death, resurrection, judgment, heaven, hell. But the language is imaginative, not imaginary. These things are real.

They are real *now*, they reach into our daily lives – we live *now* with the prospect of judgment, in the light of judgment. We also live now in the lively hope of resurrection, in the light of resurrection, by the grace of God, and all this has a transforming effect on our lives *now*. Praise be to God for that. This is all part of the great richness of Christian life which is best summed up as the Now *and* the Not Yet. And so that life, that richness, that not-yet-ness stretch away from the now into the bright mystery of the eternal. Our own resurrection and judgment lie beyond this life.

Beyond this life... There is a terrible temptation amongst Christians to be judgmental, which is a by-product of that joy-gone-sour that I mentioned earlier, and which Jesus excoriated in the pharisees of his day. Then we edit God out of the picture. Who are we to judge? Jesus and Paul are both emphatic about this. They repeatedly tell us not to do the judging. This is not so much about sanctimonious moralising, which can be uncharitable; but more about taking a view on other people's salvation status. That is quite simply playing God.

In the face of that temptation, I reach for some powerful words which I found when on retreat once. They are by the French worker-priest Henri Perrin in the 1950's:

'Our Christianity isn't just rules and ceremonies; it's God's passion for this bloody world and the whole of squabbling mankind; it's the work of Christ who takes the love of those poor people in charge, and it's a love that neither you nor I can judge, because God alone can read a human heart and see, perhaps, the greatest love when we see only defects and weaknesses.

So let's leave the adding-up to God. His scales aren't the same as ours. All that's asked of us is to love mankind with passion, and show it that Christ's love burns.'

Christ's love burns. The Jewish Temple may have ended up lying in ruins, smashed and burned by the Romans; and Isaiah would have been inconsolable at such an idea. But the words given to him in prophecy, such as we heard in that first reading, had a hidden and far more amazing meaning.

At the heart of this is the good news that the God who will judge us one day is the God who leaves the door open to penitence, saying sorry, time after time after time. His mercy is beyond measure. We fall, we reach out and he picks us up, his arm outstretched already. Every day, every hour of the day. And when each of us comes to judgment it will be before the Lord who loves us in infinite, intimate detail, and who knows our hearts and minds better than we know them ourselves (Ps 139). It will be before the Lord who came to save the world, not condemn it (Jn 3.17). It will be before the Lord who was lifted up to draw all people, all of us, to himself (Jn 12.32). It will be before the Lord who will 'save those who are eagerly waiting for him' (Heb 9.28).

And so let us dare to work towards that day, living this life in the light of it. Daring to be beacons of God's love and mercy. Daring to stay on that hard road of discipleship; not alone but in the company of all those others who are there with us, from east and west. Daring to be in that great stream of pilgrims - and bringing others along too. Amen.

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